

IDIC

**HOME
to
ROOST 1**

**a
Star Trek
fanzine**



CONTENTS

The Nebulous Crab	by Sheila Clark	P 1
Crossroads	by Valerie Piacentini	P 20
The Waters of the		
Dead World	by Sheila Clark	P 26
To Fear No Evil	by Sheila Clark	P 33
The Sadists	by Sheila Clark	P 61
Always Tomorrow	by Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini	P 63

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Hello, and welcome to this, the first zine put out by IDIC.

We are getting some submissions for IDIC zines, but so far we don't have enough to put out one consisting of new stories. However, three or four months ago, Rosemary Irving asked me about a story Valerie and I had had printed in America fully ten years ago, and it occurred to us that over the years, Valerie and I had, between us, submitted a fair number of stories to other editors - some in Britain, some in America. With the possible exception of two that were reprinted, these have long been out of print - in most cases the zines involved were put out in the 1970s. Rosemary's inquiry reminded us of the existence of these stories, and we decided to gather them together and reprint them for IDIC - hence the name of the zine. These stories have come home to roost.

We have done a minor - very minor - edit to some of the stories when we retyped them for this zine. Several were written a long time ago, when we were both very inexperienced, and when we looked at them again, we felt it showed.

One of the stories in this issue is a 2-pager that was originally written as a competition entry for the American zine Contact; the first half page was the set piece which had to be explained.

We are in the process of compiling a second issue of our stories from other zines, to be put out within a month of this one (we hope), and - with luck - there may even be a third in the autumn. We hope you enjoy them.

As usual, we are looking for submissions of fiction, poetry and artwork; either original series or Next Generation. Since we are also putting out zines under the ScotPress name, please indicate on your manuscript that the story is a submission for IDIC. Submissions should be sent to either of the addresses below.

We are looking for action-adventure stories, preferably with some character inter-relationship. Alternate universe stories are acceptable. No X-rated stories, please! Anything else will be considered, as long as it is primarily about the established Trek universe characters or races - for example, we would consider a story that was wholly about Klingons or Romulans as these races appear in Trek. We are not, however, in the market for stories that are solely about totally original characters or races of the writers' own creation as this is entering the realms of original Science Fiction rather than Star Trek.

Of course, we are still also looking for submissions for ScotPress. Our policy for ScotPress is a little more limited - no death of main characters, no movie-based stories, no K/S and no stories about other ships or crews - these are 'The voyages of the Starship Enterprise...'



Submissions may be sent to either -

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THE NEBULOUS CRAB

by

Sheila Clark

The Enterprise had penetrated well into unexplored space. No-one knew just what they might encounter, what level of civilisation the natives of the various solar systems might have reached. The ship was so far into unknown territory that any messages to Starfleet would take many months to reach their destination; the crew was wholly on its own.

Kirk found the prospect of being entirely his own master exhilarating. Although fairly autonomous, usually they were within reasonable reach of a Starbase, and could be contacted and their orders changed at fairly short notice. But this time nothing could be changed unless he ordered it.

In time they approached a small solar system, one with only six planets whirling round a K-type sun.

The innermost planet was obviously too hot, too near its primary, to be worth close investigation; they approached the second. This was the one well-situated in the ecosphere; if there was life in this system, it would be found here.

"Report, Mr. Spock."

"The sensor beams are bouncing back off the planet," Spock reported after a moment. "Something in the atmosphere is preventing the beams from reaching the surface."

"Strange," Kirk commented. "Can you think of anything that would account for it?"

"No, Captain. It is a completely new phenomenon. The impression I receive is of the beams being reflected back by a mirror. Either there is a belt of something in the atmosphere which is stopping the beams, or there is a very high intelligence down there putting up a shield. I would suspect the former."

Kirk punched his intercom. "Kirk to transporter room. Beam down some test material and bring it back. Report results to me."

A few minutes later the report came back. "Captain, the test material beamed down and back satisfactorily."

Kirk glanced at his First Officer. "We'll go down and have a look at the place, Mr. Spock. Lieutenant, tell Dr. McCoy to meet us in the transporter room. Take over, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

The three officers materialised at the foot of a high cliff. They looked round.

"Very quiet," Kirk observed. "Mr. Spock?"

Spock swung the tricorder round, adjusted it, readjusted it.
"Negative, Captain. There is no reading."

"Nothing?"

"It is as if the tricorder were switched off."

Kirk pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

There was no answer.

They looked at each other.

"Oh, well," Kirk said philosophically. "All we have to do is stay put. Someone will take the initiative of beaming us up in an hour or two."

"This is very interesting," Spock said thoughtfully. "I wonder if the phasers will work?"

"Probably not," Kirk replied doubtfully.

Spock aimed his phaser at a nearby rock. Nothing happened.

"Nothing mechanical works," Spock commented unnecessarily.

"Your theoretical belt of something must stretch to ground level," Kirk suggested. Spock nodded. "And there's nothing you know of that could account for it?" Kirk went on. "It must be something unique."

"Not necessarily, Captain," Spock said. "My memory is excellent, but I have to have the knowledge presented to me in the first place. There are many things I do not know. And this *is* an unexplored part of the galaxy."

"Think a lot of yourself, don't you?" McCoy put in.

"I cannot deny the facts, Doctor."

Kirk looked at him affectionately. "You may not know how to play hide and seek, Spock, but I shouldn't think there's much in the line of duty that you don't know."

They looked round again.

"No sign of intelligent life," Kirk went on. "Though that could just mean an uninhabited area."

"Civilisation could not develop here," the Vulcan said thoughtfully. "It would reach a certain level, then stagnate..."

"Or else the drawbacks would give greater incentive to develop."

"It would still be very limited. Logically there is a point beyond which there can be no development without mechanisation."

"On Earth, the Egyptians, the Romans, the Chinese, among others, had a very high level of civilisation, and they were non-mechanised," McCoy put in.

"It was still extremely limited," Spock maintained. "Travel was slow - "

"Craftsmanship was much greater," McCoy insisted. "In their own field, men had possibly greater ability than they have today."

Spock looked doubtful. "That is partially true," he admitted. "However, overall knowledge was less, and what the race could accomplish in any given field was kept to physical capability - dexterity, if you like - and visual observation inside the mental abilities of your race. Your people were held up in development until you discovered the potentialities of fuel oil. Then you advanced quickly. You accomplished more in a century after that than you had in the five thousand years before it. On this planet you would still be using horses and manpower."

"I suppose it really depends on what you mean by progress," Kirk said slowly. "Mechanisation can lead to much greater impersonality in many things... even when it leads to greater efficiency. In that case, can it truly be called progress?"

He wandered a little nearer to the cliff, looking up at it. "It would have been nasty if we'd materialised just on the edge of that," he said as he bent to examine a fairly large rock which showed streaks of quartz.

McCoy moved over to join him, his eyes fixed on the lichen that crept up the face of the cliff. Reddish in colour, it seemed to glow translucently in the sunlight.

Suddenly, hearing a faint noise, Spock glanced up. He leaped forward, cannoned into McCoy and knocked him into Kirk. They ended up in a tangled heap pressed close against a small hollow at the foot of the cliff. Seconds later a huge rock thudded to the ground beside them, followed by others, both large and small, falling thick and fast.

After what seemed like a very long time, the noise of falling rock stopped. Cautiously, Spock raised his head.

And saw nothing.

He took a deep breath. "Captain? Doctor?"

"I'm all right, Spock," McCoy replied. There was no answer from Kirk.

McCoy reached out, groping blindly in the dark. He felt an arm and began to run his hand up it towards the head.

"That is my arm, Doctor," Spock said gravely.

McCoy let go rather quickly and began to grope about again. He touched another arm. "Spock? Is that you?"

"No, Doctor, you have not touched me this time."

McCoy moved his hand up the limp arm to the head. He touched the neck pulse, and breathed a sigh of relief. "He's alive, anyway," he said. He felt over Kirk's head gently and grunted. "A rock must have hit him," he went on. "He seems to have cut his head open." He wriggled slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position, aware that Spock was doing the same, but they had very

little space in which to move. They ended up each on his side, with Kirk between them, Spock's arm under Kirk's head, pillowing it. Both were pressed against the sides of the rock cave that imprisoned them; above their heads was very little space. By reaching up they could touch the roof.

Kirk grunted slightly, then, "Spock? Bones?"

"Here, Jim," McCoy said softly.

"I can't see. Where are we?"

"We're trapped," Spock said quietly. "The rock fall was greater than I had anticipated."

"You saved us from being squashed, anyway," McCoy put in.

"If I had had any sense, I would have pulled you away from the cliff, rather than this."

"You wouldn't have had the time," Kirk said. He reached out, across Spock's body, to touch the wall, groped up to feel across the roof and down the other wall behind McCoy. "How long before we suffocate?"

"About an hour and three minutes," Spock replied quietly, almost reluctantly. "I can't say closer than that."

"Close enough."

They lay silent for some time. After a while, Kirk said softly, "Spock... Bones. I wish... I wish you were both safe on the Enterprise... but at the same time... I'm glad you're here with me."

"That is not very logical, Captain," Spock murmured.

"Well, I know exactly what he means, Spock," McCoy retorted. "And I agree with him. I'm glad we're together... even though I wish you were both safe," he finished, so quietly that they could barely hear him.

There was silence for a moment.

"Completely illogical," Spock repeated. "But... I also am content that we should die together."

There was another long silence as they each lay enjoying the company of the others in a strangely peaceful rapport. At last, Kirk said lightly, "My feet are getting cold."

Spock replied thoughtfully, "Air must be coming in from somewhere. We should be feeling it stuffy by now."

"Through gaps in the rockfall?" McCoy asked. In his mind was the thought that suffocation would have been quick; but to die of thirst would be unpleasant - and Spock, with his greater tolerance of adverse conditions, would also have the horrible experience of sharing his grave with the bodies of his already dead friends for an uncertain length of additional suffering before he also succumbed.

"I think it unlikely," Spock said reflectively. "Doctor, you are nearest to the rock wall. Are there any holes in it close to

the ground?"

McCoy twisted round to face the cliff, pressing hard against Kirk as he did so. Kirk grunted as the breath was forced out of his lungs by the pressure of the surgeon's body.

McCoy groped his way along the wall as far as he could reach.

"Nothing," he said at last. "But I can't reach the cliff near my feet."

Spock sat up cautiously, careful lest he bump his head. He managed to sit upright and wriggled his way towards where his head had lain. Kirk, realising what he was doing, also sat up. He winced as the movement and the upright position hurt his head, making it ache, but he said nothing about it, unwilling to worry the others.

He also wriggled back, against Spock, leaving McCoy more space in which to move.

McCoy groped his way towards his feet. Finally, he said, "There does seem to be a hole here, but it's a tiny one."

Spock, edging round Kirk, felt his way to where McCoy was feeling; he touched McCoy's arm and used it as a guide to find the hole.

The draught was unmistakeable.

He felt round the tiny hole and began to dig in the hard earth around it with his bare hands. McCoy immediately moved to help him.

"What are you doing?" Kirk asked.

"Digging," McCoy grunted in a tone that said *Ask a silly question...*

Kirk moved towards them, but could only touch their backs.

"There isn't room for you as well, Jim," McCoy said. He also remembered how Kirk had been knocked out; he had no intention of letting Kirk in to dig if he could possibly avoid it.

After a while, Kirk said, "Come on, it's time I took my turn."

"We'll manage, Captain," Spock objected. He also remembered Kirk's spell of unconsciousness.

"My turn," Kirk said firmly. "That's an order. Come on, Bones. Let me in."

Reluctantly, McCoy wriggled aside. Kirk took his place. He felt at the hole for moment.

"This is going to take impossibly long," he said. His friends had made surprisingly little impact on it.

"The ground is certainly very hard," Spock admitted. "But I think that the original hole is getting bigger as we dig deeper. Possibly only the mouth of it was blocked."

Kirk merely grunted.

A little later, McCoy said quietly, "Spock, your turn to have a break."

"I do not require a 'break', Doctor; if you and the Captain alternate I can continue for some time yet."

"You'll be better for a rest, Spock," Kirk put in. "Let Bones take your place."

Unwillingly, Spock obeyed, but within a very short time he relieved Kirk, whose head was now aching so abominably that he made little demur.

At last, when all three were suffering from torn and blistered hands, they decided that the hole was large enough - barely - for them to get through.

"Shall I try it?" Spock asked calmly.

"Be careful," Kirk warned.

Spock wriggled into the hole. The others listened anxiously to the scraping sounds that drifted back to them as he went. After some moments -

"It opens into a large passage," came Spock's voice, only slightly muffled by the distance between them. "I cannot reach the roof, the walls are about two metres apart, but they are not even, so that the width varies slightly. The floor is quite smooth, as far as I can ascertain."

"We're coming through," Kirk called. "Go on, Bones. You first."

McCoy began to crawl through the narrow tunnel. It was only a few yards long. He knew as soon as the roof began to rise, and got to his knees. A moment later he was able to scramble upright.

"I'm through," he said.

The scraping sounds began behind him. After some moments, when the sounds stopped, Spock said quietly, "Captain?"

"I'm here. Can you see anything, Mr. Spock?"

"Even my eyes need some light," Spock replied.

"Do you suppose the passage gets any wider?"

"It is possible." His outstretched hand touched one of them. "Captain?"

"Yes. Bones, where are you?"

"Here." McCoy groped his way towards the voice, and after what seemed an eternity, touched an arm.

"We'd better keep close together," Kirk said. "If we lose contact in this dark, we might never find each other again."

"Not easily," Spock agreed.

It was becoming an effort to think. All Kirk really wanted to

do was lie down and rest. But he couldn't. They had to get out of here, and he mustn't be a burden on the others. He had to keep going...

"I suggest we follow one of the walls," Spock was saying. "That will give us a guide; and even if it does widen more, we'll still have an indication of where we're going."

They clasped hands to ensure that they stayed together, Spock and McCoy by mutual consent putting Kirk between them. They set off, slowly at first, then with more confidence as the passage continued, level-floored, in a relatively straight line.

"It would appear that this passage has been, if not made, at least improved," Spock commented after they had been travelling for about half an hour. "I have never heard of a natural cave with such a level floor."

"Might it be a lava tunnel?" Kirk asked, forcing himself to make an intelligent comment in case the others should suspect that he was below par.

"Barely smooth enough for that," Spock objected.

"Why should it be made - or improved?" McCoy asked.

"As a communications medium," Spock suggested, "in much the same way as railway tunnels were still built on your Earth... There's light ahead."

"Your eyes are better than ours," Kirk managed. His head was now pounding almost unbearably, and he felt sick. He kept seeing flashes of light, but he was sure that what he was seeing and what Spock was seeing were two different things.

They moved on a little further.

"I see it!" McCoy exclaimed. Kirk said nothing, all his will-power now concentrated on continuing to place one foot in front of the other without letting the others realise his weakness.

It was further to the light than they had thought at first, and it was many minutes later that they stood at the end of the passage, looking out over a large cave.

It was well-lit by great smoky torches that stood on holders round the cave walls. A great fire burned in the middle of the cave; the smoke from it curled upwards to be lost from sight in the cavernous space above them. Several people were moving about.

Kirk took one step forward, and found that his legs would no longer support him.

Spock caught him as he fell. McCoy bent over him, seeing for the first time the gash on his head where a rock had caught him. Dried blood caked one side of his face, although McCoy knew this inevitably looked worse than it was. He felt in his bag for his scanner.

"How is he, Doctor?"

McCoy pursed his lips. "Worse than he should be," he said bluntly. "If he had told me he wasn't right, I could have given him

some medication ages ago; I'd have been able to find what I wanted by touch. But now... " His voice trailed off.

He took out a hypo, gave Kirk a shot.

"I'm all right," Kirk protested weakly.

"Sure, I know," McCoy said with a cheerfulness he was far from feeling. "You feel like wrestling with a Berengarian dragon. Well, forget it. The state you're in just now, you could be pushed over by one of their eggs."

Spock heard a faint noise and looked up from his study of Kirk's pale face.

Two men had come over, attracted to them by the sound of their voices, and were standing watching interestedly as McCoy attended to the blood-stained Kirk. As Spock looked up, one of them gave a hesitant smile, his gaze fixed on the insignia on Spock's chest.

"Welcome," he said. Even in the one word it was easy to detect a strong accent. "You are from the Star Fleet?"

Spock's eyebrow lifted in some surprise. "You know of our people?"

"You can think about that later," McCoy put in. He looked up at the men. "Our Captain is hurt," he said. "He needs warmth."

"Bring him to the fire."

Spock scooped Kirk up carefully and carried him after the men, McCoy at his side. He put Kirk down near the fire, sitting down himself to provide a pillow for his Captain. One of the men signed to a woman; she moved away, to return almost immediately with a blanket. McCoy almost snatched it from her and spread it over Kirk.

Spock looked at him, a question in his eyes.

"He has a slight fever," McCoy said, "which he wouldn't have had if he'd just had the sense to tell me just how badly he was hurt. I knew he'd cut his head, but in the dark I couldn't tell how badly. I thought it was superficial, and that he'd just been knocked out. It's possible that there's some infection in the cut, though it has bled enough to have cleaned it." He took a cleansing pad from his medical kit and began to clean away the dried blood.

A woman came over to him, holding out an earthenware jar. In it was a yellowish ointment.

He smiled up at her. "It's all right, thanks," he said. "I do have something for it." He showed her his medical kit.

She shook her head. "This good," she insisted. "You use. Good for fever."

"A local cure might be harmful to our metabolism," McCoy muttered to Spock.

One of the men joined them. He glanced at the woman, then at McCoy. "The ointment is good," he said. "It has been used before. It will not hurt him."

McCoy hesitated for a second longer, then reached out to the jar. He smeared some of the ointment onto and around the cut. The woman smiled her satisfaction, and moved away, joining a growing crowd that watched and listened from far enough away not to get in anyone's way.

Spock looked up at the man. "How do you know about Starfleet?" he asked.

"The Pioneer spent some time here nearly ten years ago," was the amazing reply. "Some of us learned your language then, and we have been very careful to remember it. We were sure your people would return one day."

"I thought we were the first ship to come into this area," McCoy said, more to Spock than to the native.

"The Pioneer was lost seven point four standard years ago," Spock said thoughtfully. "She made no report of finding an inhabited planet..." He thought briefly, calculating. "Ten planetary years would be approximately seven and half standard years. She may have been lost just after leaving here. However, I did not realise that she had been in this area."

"Didn't Starfleet know?" McCoy asked, startled.

"Apparently not. Certainly Starfleet did not know she had come this far into unexplored space. But I met her Captain once; I remember thinking he was born out of his time. He really belonged in the past, in the days when an explorer could - if he had the money - just get up and go wherever he wanted to." He shook his head, disapproving of such impetuosity. "Like you, I thought we were the first ship to come this far."

"So did I," came a weak voice from Kirk. He raised his head, and seemed to realise then that it had been pillowed on Spock's leg. He turned his head to look up at the Vulcan.

"How do you feel, Captain?" his First Officer asked.

"I'm all right," Kirk answered. Both Spock and McCoy looked doubtful. McCoy ran his scanner over Kirk, and his eyebrows went up.

"You are, too," he said, "That's pretty good stuff."

Kirk glanced at the native. "Go on," he said, and they realised that he had been conscious enough to be aware of the conversation. "The Pioneer was here about ten years ago. Go on."

"It was nearly a year later that everything mechanical suddenly stopped operating and our civilisation crumbled overnight," the native continued.

The three men looked at each other. "Go on," Kirk encouraged.

"We were not as mechanically advanced as the men on the Pioneer, but we were very dependent on machines. Many of our people were unable to adapt to the new conditions, which were of necessity extremely primitive. They either died or killed themselves. The rest of us found it too depressing to continue living in the ruins of our cities; many of us came to live in the caves. We survive by doing a little farming and hunting; but strangely enough, the number

of poisonous and other dangerous animals has increased tremendously, and we have lost many men to them."

"Have you no idea what caused the change in conditions?" Spock asked.

The native shook his head with an up and down movement that they at first took to be affirmative and then realised was negative. "There is nothing we know of that could have caused it," he said.

"And it was very sudden?"

"Overnight."

"Strange," Kirk commented.

"Too strange to be natural," Spock added. He looked at the native. "What of the dangerous animals?" he asked.

"Our world was civilised," the man said. "There were dangerous animals, but all lived in restricted environments. Now, whatever the reason, they have increased tremendously in numbers, and spread out into areas where they never lived before." He shivered, fear in his eyes. "They are terrible," he added. "We have lost so many men to them... I wouldn't have thought it possible for animals to have spread out so much in just nine years."

"With no check on their breeding, wild animals would spread," Spock observed.

"But it's not just the animals," interrupted another native who had come up unnoticed. "A few miles south of here the land that borders the sea has suddenly become desert... overnight, too. It was lush, fertile land before. And dangerous animals abound there. But they shouldn't. There's nothing there for them..."

Kirk glanced at Spock. "Comment?"

"It would appear," Spock said slowly, "that something has disturbed the natural ecology of the planet."

"The same something that has caused the 'shield' you postulated was blocking the sensors?"

"Extremely probable."

"Then I think we should investigate."

"I agree, Captain."

"I don't," McCoy cut in. "Not immediately, anyway. You may be miraculously recovered, Jim, but you're still not right. You need a night's sleep before you try doing anything strenuous." He looked at Spock. "Don't you back him up, Spock. He does need it. Another night won't make that much difference, after ten years."

"Nine," Spock corrected automatically even as he nodded his agreement. "Dr. McCoy is correct, Captain. Indeed, I consider that we all need rest, myself included. Digging that hole was... rather tiring for us all."

McCoy caught sight of Spock's hands as he finished speaking and

reached out to grip them. They were cut, with raw sores where blisters had burst. Neither Kirk nor McCoy himself had suffered such intense injury to his hands from the digging; this was sure proof that Spock had done far more than his fair share of the work.

He reached for his medi-kit again, and gave Spock a shot. The Vulcan looked disgusted, but refrained from protest.

The natives supplied them with a meal, then gave them a quiet corner where they settled down for a few hours' sleep. Spock woke first, and lay still for several minutes just watching his friends, thinking over what both had said while they were trapped by the rockfall, feeling an unaccustomed happiness as he remembered their closeness during the minutes when they had all thought that they were soon to die. He admitted to himself that he did not want to live without them... even as he had admitted it to them...

After a few minutes he shook McCoy awake. The surgeon blinked up at him.

"It is time to go, Doctor... if the Captain is fit enough."

McCoy turned to the still sleeping Kirk. He ran his scanner over him.

"He seems to be fully recovered," he said. "He'll have to watch that he doesn't hurt his head again until that gash heals, but there's no further infection in it and no fever... What about your hands?"

Resignedly, Spock held out his hands to McCoy, who checked them quickly.

"They'll do, but don't try to use them too much."

Turning back to the Captain, he shook him awake.

At first their walk was through pleasant countryside. Trees, bushes, and a variety of flowers and grasses provided surroundings through which it was a pleasure to travel. Then, abruptly, as if a line had been drawn by a ruler, the countryside changed.

Ahead of them was desert - bare, desolate. Great rocks littered the landscape. A few cactus plants grew, half-heartedly providing a touch of green to an earth-brown scene. The three men looked at each other.

"This doesn't look natural," McCoy asked.

"Very unnatural," Spock agreed. "There should be at least a minimal transition zone, several miles wide." He tried his tricorder, from sheer force of habit, and shook his head. "Nothing."

"Frustrating, Spock?" McCoy asked.

Spock regarded him consideringly. "No, Doctor," he said. "Merely an inconvenience, no greater than the one provided by your presence."

Kirk grinned slightly as he also remembered the words that had

been said while they were trapped... the words that neither Spock nor McCoy would ever admit to having said, now that they were safe again.

They moved into the desert, using the sun as a guide, and headed for the sea, still several miles distant. Abruptly, Kirk stopped, staring at the ground in front of them.

"What is it, Jim?" McCoy asked.

"A rattlesnake... "

"I see nothing," Spock put in.

"... right in front of us!"

McCoy froze, staring. The snake reared its head, staring at him; he knew it was poised to strike. He wanted to jump away, but couldn't; he wasn't even sure that that was the best thing to do.

As the snake struck, Kirk leaped forward. He thrust McCoy out of the way; and the snake struck him. He staggered back, clutching his wrist where it had bitten him, while the snake wriggled rapidly away. McCoy sprang to Kirk's side.

Spock stared in blank amazement as McCoy bent over Kirk's wrist, and in even greater astonishment as McCoy whipped a scalpel from his medi-kit.

"What are you doing Doctor?"

"What do you mean? Jim's been bitten!" He poised the scalpel to slash Kirk's wrist. Spock moved with fantastic rapidity and caught his arm in time to stop him.

"He hasn't been bitten! There's nothing there!"

"Dammit, Spock, let me attend to him! He'll die if I don't!"

Indeed, Kirk was already looking decidedly ill. His arm was swelling badly; at least, McCoy thought it was. Spock was less certain. All he saw was that Kirk was looking unsteady, and was holding his arm as if it were painning him badly.

Spock shook McCoy fiercely. "There was nothing there, Doctor!" he repeated. Kirk looked at him. "Are you... sure, Spock?" he asked. It was already an effort to talk.

"Yes, Captain."

"But... I saw... it. And I... I felt it... bite... It's sore... "

Spock moved to his side, hand outstretched to Kirk's face. He concentrated as he touched it.

"There was no snake, Jim. Your arm is whole. There was no snake. Believe with me. It was an illusion, Jim. It was an illusion... "

To McCoy's eyes there was no change; Kirk's arm remained swollen, he looked very ill, the two puncture marks on his wrist remained an angry red; but Kirk himself was feeling better. His arm

no longer pained him, and he was no longer feeling unsteady. He straightened up.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," he said quietly. He glanced at McCoy. "Maybe you'd better attend to Bones, too."

Spock followed his eyes, and nodded. He moved over to the pale, horror-stricken doctor, and raised his hand to McCoy's face.

Slowly McCoy relaxed, seeing the swelling on Kirk's arm disappearing, the bite marks disappear as if by magic.

Spock withdrew contact. They looked at him, then at each other.

"The snake was an illusion," Kirk said.

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk looked round. The desert stretched in front of them. How much of it was real? He asked Spock.

The Vulcan glanced round. Then he repeated the examination, more slowly.

"I don't know, Jim," he said simply. "It could all be an illusion. Or none of it might be illusion. I just don't know."

"But you were sure about the snake," McCoy objected.

"Although the transition from fertile ground to desert was so sudden, it is in fact quite logical for there to be a desert here," Spock pointed out. "It is not logical, however, for there to be a rattlesnake, a wholly Terran species, present in this desert. Therefore, I can see the desert, if it is an illusion, because it is logical; I can see cactus plants, because their presence is logical; but I could not see a species of snake that I know could not be there, for that is not logical." He moved over to a nearby cactus. "What will happen if I crush this, I wonder?"

The cactus crushed, leaving a moist sap. Spock touched his finger to it, tasted it. "Completely realistic," he said.

"In that case we won't die of thirst," McCoy said grimly.

"You think the cactus plants are an illusion, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"I am almost certain that the whole desert is. But I cannot break this illusion."

They moved on. Several times the two Humans saw creatures that they knew were dangerous, but when Spock saw nothing, they accepted these as illusion and, ignoring them, moved on.

"Don't you see any creatures you know are dangerous?" McCoy asked Spock.

"It is illogical for any Vulcan species to be here, Doctor; as illogical as it is for Terran species to be present."

Ahead of them they saw a ravine. Kirk stopped.

"Spock?"

"I don't know. Its presence is logical. It might or might not be real."

He moved cautiously to its edge, and lay down. "Hold my legs, Captain, in case it is real."

He felt forward cautiously, his eyes closed. His hand went down below the level of the ground on which he was lying.

After a few moments of feeling about carefully, he raised his head. "I believe it is real, Captain."

Kirk stood looking at it for a while. The edges were loose; it would be far from easy to climb down and up the other side. Well, it was try it or give up altogether.

He sat on the edge of the ravine, then swung round, scrabbling with his toes for a hold. He began to feel his way down; the others followed him. It was not easy; the loose earth fell away under his weight; earth fell on his head from above, kicked loose by his friends.

At last he reached the bottom; he waited for the others, then they crossed the broken ground at the base of the ravine and reached the other side. They began to climb up.

The soil on this side was drier, looser; there were no holds worth mentioning. They scrambled their way up, digging their toes into the loose soil, digging their fingers in. McCoy spared a breathless moment to think anxiously about Spock's hands, cut and raw from his efforts to dig them free from the rockfall.

Kirk felt himself beginning to slip; he lunged upwards, and caught at the top of the ravine. He pulled himself over the rim, and turned to watch the others.

Spock reached the top; Kirk pulled him over. Then as McCoy reached for the top his foot slipped, sending a shower of earth back into the gully. Kirk caught at his wrists; Spock, behind him, caught at him so that he would not be pulled over. Between them, they hauled McCoy over the top and subsided, panting.

Kirk drew a deep breath. He was aware of his head, which was beginning to ache again from his exertions. He wondered if one of the small stones knocked loose by the others had perhaps hit his head without his realising it; *but it can't be bleeding again*, he thought, *or Bones would be fussing over me already.*

They went on. The desert looked a little more fertile now, as if the illusion was failing, but it was still far from inviting.

Then suddenly they came in sight of a collection of long, low buildings, quite unlike anything they had ever seen before. Behind the buildings was the sea, long waves breaking on a stretch of sand, running up it in long, sweeping caresses, leaving feather flecks of foam behind as the water ran back to join the next wave.

Several huge boulders lay on the sand; the water ran up round them and retreated from them again. It was a peaceful and oddly beautiful scene.

The three friends moved forward towards the buildings.

"Is this a reality?" Kirk asked.

"I think so," Spock replied.

Then one of the boulders moved.

As they watched, open-mouthed, the boulder began to move away from the water towards the buildings.

"What is it?" McCoy gasped.

"It must be a living being," Spock said calmly. He watched carefully.

The being had a superficial resemblance to a horta, but more closely resembled a Terran crab except that it had no visible legs. Now that he was watching it carefully, Spock saw that it had two antennae, and two claw-like appendages just below these.

The creature moved past the buildings and came towards them. A yard from them it stopped, looked at them... and they understood what it wanted to say.

\\Who are you?\\ it asked. \\What are you doing here?\\

Kirk swallowed. His training had not included instructions in how to speak to telepathic crabs.

"We are from the United Federation of Planets," he said, a little nervously - more nervous with this encounter than he could remember being even at his first contact mission when he was still a lieutenant. "You will not have heard of us; we come from another part of the Galaxy, and this is only the second visit to this planet by our people."

\\There is intelligent life in the cosmos apart from ours?\\

"Yes. There are many intelligent races. Some have more knowledge than others; not all have the secret of space flight. But although our race has this knowledge, we are stranded here because on this world our communications devices will not work."

\\Certain sound waves upset the brain pattern of our species,\\ the crab told him. \\Our craft have shielded engines because of this. When we landed and saw that this planet was suitable for settlement, we became aware of those sound waves emanating from somewhere on the planet, and we put out a blanketing shield so that we would not be disturbed by them.\\

"You've settled here?"

\\Yes; our own planet became too dry. We are an amphibious race; part of our life span is spent in water, and we enjoy being in water at all times. Travelling here was a terrible experience... between the dryness and the mental upsets caused by even the shielded engines.\\

"But you've disrupted the lives of the native inhabitants of this planet!" Kirk objected. "Couldn't you have looked for an

uninhabited planet? You must have known that there was life on this one."

"We knew... but this was the first planet suitable to us we found. We were so relieved to find one that we chose not to travel further. The original inhabitants can live here also; all we ask is the land close to the sea."

"You killed many of them by the changes you made. Thousands - millions - died!"

The creature was silent for some minutes. Only Spock, with his telepathic ability, realised that it was communicating with its fellows. At last -

"We are not wholly unreasonable. We will set you and your friends a number of problems... a test. If you are intelligent enough to solve them inside one of your hours, we will leave and go elsewhere. If, however, you fail in even one of the problems, or exceed the time, we remain."

"We agree," Kirk said after a glance at his First Officer. They had, after all, no choice. "One thing... if you do leave - or even if you stay - the Federation would be glad to have contact with your race."

"We will... consider it."

It was, in effect, a straightforward intelligence test that they were given. Most of the tests were easy to Spock's highly intuitive mind. Only one test provided any difficulty. They faced it with only a few minutes of their hour used up.

It was, quite simply, to find their way through a maze. But the walls of the maze were invisible.

"A telepathic maze," Spock murmured.

"Force fields?" Kirk asked.

Spock shook his head. "Purely telepathic, I think."

They groped their way about for many minutes. Several times they thought they had found the key, only to discover that they had made a mistake and were forced to grope an uncertain way back - and too often, they were sure they had not found the way back to where they had been. Kirk began to be acutely aware of the time they were using up.

"How long?" he asked once, near-despair in his voice.

"We still have twenty three minutes, forty two seconds," Spock replied calmly.

They felt their way on. Even Spock's rudimentary telepathic sense was of little use here; his mind operated on a different wavelength altogether. At last they reached a point where they were stuck. They seemed to be in a small enclosed space; a space only a yard or so square. And they couldn't even find the way they had entered it.

Kirk leaned back wearily against the invisible wall. "How long?" he said again.

"Seventeen minutes and - "

"Near enough at seventeen minutes," Kirk interrupted. He sighed, shaking his head. "Now I know how frustrated an experimental rat must feel."

McCoy snapped his fingers.

"What is it, Bones?"

"That's it! An experimental rat! It must be some sort of trick entrance. I've seen rats given that sort of maze to master - and they've done it, too. Sometimes quite quickly. Don't tell me we're not more intelligent than a rat."

"What sort of trick entrance were you envisaging, Doctor?" Spock remained wholly practical.

"Mmm. There are several kinds. You have to apply pressure in the right place, or it's some sort of swing door - "

"I would doubt its being that," Spock commented. "We have applied pressure evenly at all parts of the 'wall'. If it was a swing door, it would surely have opened."

"Or, since it's a telepathic maze, the placing of the entrance might have been altered. Put lower, say."

Kirk was already on his knees, feeling round the base of the 'walls'. On the second wall, he looked up.

"You're right, Bones! There's a way out here."

They crawled through. Soon they felt the 'roof' above them heighten; it became possible to walk upright again. They continued doggedly.

They reached another dead end, and turned back. Then another. They turned back again. Kirk was sweating now, McCoy almost as badly. Only Spock continued as if they had all the time in the world. His face was a mask of concentration.

Then - "I think I have the key, Captain." Spock led the way unerringly until he was brought up short by another impenetrable wall. For once he allowed his sense of disappointment to show; his shoulders drooped wearily.

"I apologise, Captain," he said dully. "And there is no more time to try again; we have only just over a minute left."

But the Humans were paying him no attention. Both were feeling desperately over and along the walls, searching for an exit. It was McCoy, with his knowledge of the sort of tricks that were built into mazes for experimental animals, who found the catch - a simple knob that he failed to turn, then pressed. He felt the wall open.

"This way!" He scrambled out, and felt the wind blowing through his hair. They were out of the maze. Kirk followed close at his heels, with Spock just behind.

They looked round for the telepathic crabs, but saw none. Then they became aware of a humming sound. The sky darkened for a moment. Then it cleared.

They stared around in amazement, for their surroundings had completely changed. The low buildings were gone. The surrounding desert was gone. In its place was a great stretch of fertile land, lush grass waving in the wind. The only thing unchanged was the sea, still running up the sand in long sweeping surges.

Spock drew a deep breath. "We got out with only eight seconds to spare," he said quietly.

"And they've gone," Kirk added. "Well, they kept their bargain. I just wish there was some way we could be sure of finding them again." He pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Captain! Ye're all right! - Ah, Scott here, Captain."

"Three to beam up, Scotty."

McCoy took them both off to sickbay as soon as they materialised. Both protested; both told the other that he should go, even while objecting about going himself. McCoy pushed them both into bed, and turned his attention first to Kirk's head. The cut needed some attention. That seen to, he glared intimidatingly down at his Captain.

"Now, Jim - do you go to sleep peacefully, or do I sedate you?"

Kirk made a face. "I'll sleep," he promised.

McCoy turned to Spock and checked his hands. Despite his Vulcan healing powers, Spock's hands were looking nasty. McCoy checked him over, gave him an injection, and glared at him. "Sleep or sedation?"

Spock sighed audibly. "I'll sleep," he said.

McCoy turned to leave. At the door, he turned to look back at his friends. Both were watching him. He grinned at them, and left.

He released them next day on their promise to do nothing too strenuous. He did agree to let them beam down to the cave where they met the natives; but he insisted on accompanying them.

The natives met them at the cave entrance, already aware of the change.

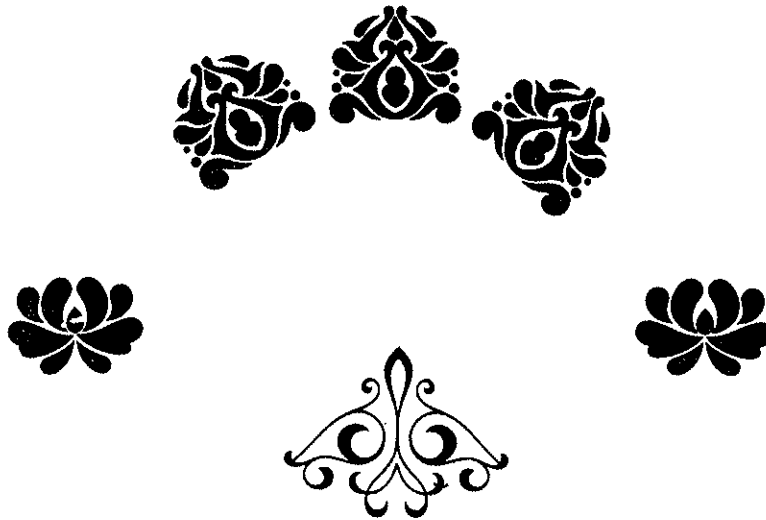
"I don't think you'll have any more trouble," Kirk told them. "And any help the Federation can give you - "

"We must do this for ourselves," was the reply. "It is ten years since one of your ships was last here; if it is another ten before your people come again, we will have something to show you."

"It should be a lot less," Kirk answered. "Good luck."

He looked at his friends, and smiled. "Let's go home," he said simply.

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CROSSROADS

by

Valerie Piacentini

There always seemed to be something vaguely unreal about civilian space terminals, Kirk thought as he glanced idly around the comfortable passenger lounge. Perhaps it was only the absence of the intense urgency he always associated with Starfleet? Shrugging, he dismissed the question - he wasn't really interested - and resumed his bored survey of his fellow passengers.

What the hell was he doing here, anyway? he wondered irritably - if he'd had any sense he would have taken his refit leave on Starbase 12. But no - he'd had this sudden compulsion to go tearing off to Earth, back to a planet that held nothing for him since his mother's death. And where did he finish up? Stuck here on some miserable spaceport light-years from anywhere when the liner on which he had taken passage had been forced to put in with engine trouble. A replacement ship had been promised in a few hours, but just at the moment James T. Kirk was thoroughly bored and miserable.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd had company, but McCoy was visiting friends and Scott (as usual) had refused to be pried loose from his beloved engines; and Spock - Spock had, with irritating smugness and at the very last moment, told him that he was needed to oversee some adaptations to the computer circuits.

Perhaps I should have asked him sooner, Kirk thought, but somehow he'd taken it for granted that Spock would go with him... and his stubborn pride would not let him admit that he was lonely, that he wanted the Vulcan's company. *And just look where it's got me!* he added viciously.

Kirk glanced up with idle curiosity as the lounge doors opened and a laughing, talking group swept in, surrounding the bar, ordering drinks, sending the lethargic waiters into a sudden flurry of activity. He watched, mildly amused at the commotion, wondering who they were; then suddenly an eddy of movement parted the group and he found himself staring directly into the eyes of the man at the centre of attention.

For a moment the noise of conversation faded as his memory somersaulted back through the years to the time he had last seen those eyes, sparkling with wicked amusement as they did now, teasing Kirk with the vivid recollection of old battles.

With an abrupt movement the man started forward, shaking off the detaining hand of the girl at his side as he headed directly for Kirk, who rose at his approach.

Then they stood face to face. Kirk's hand was seized and shaken, he was being pounded enthusiastically on the back, and his grin broadened to one of surprised pleasure.

"Finnegan!" he exclaimed. "Of all the... What are you doing here?"

"Jimmy, my boy, it's grand to see you!"

With an effort Kirk brought his mind back from his days at Starfleet Academy, where Finnegan's somewhat... *unusual*... sense of humour had been the bane of his existence. But those memories lived only in the past; they were no longer the carefree cadets they had once been.

Speculatively, he considered the man before him. Finnegan had changed, more than he. He looked older, prosperous, with an air of impatient authority.

"I heard you'd left Starfleet," Kirk said at last. "What happened?"

"Nothing discreditable, despite all your dire predictions," Finnegan chuckled. "I had the chance to go into business, got a few lucky breaks, and things worked out very well. I own a half share of the Orion Trading Corporation - you'll have heard of it?"

Kirk had, recognising the name of one of the wealthiest companies in the Federation, with interests on almost every settled planet. He eyed his old sparring partner with new respect - if Finnegan owned half of *that* organisation, there must be a shrewd mind behind his devil-may-care exterior.

"And you're still in Starfleet, I see," Finnegan went on. "The Enterprise, isn't it? You see, I've kept tabs on you, Jimmy-boy. You've made quite a reputation for yourself."

"Well, I have a good crew," Kirk said awkwardly; he was not accustomed to praise from this man.

"Yes, I'd heard that, too - and about your First Officer. I've got to hand it to you, Jimmy - it takes a good man to command a Vulcan. Me, I'd run a mile at the very idea."

"He's a rather unusual Vulcan," Kirk murmured.

Finnegan laughed, and drew Kirk aside to a secluded table. A waiter approached with drinks, and the two men settled, eyeing each other appraisingly.

"I'm really glad to see you, Jimmy," Finnegan said quietly. "To think - a few moments ago I was cursing that pilot of mine for being late, but if he hadn't been, I'd have missed you. I'm on a tour of inspection of our operations in this sector. As soon as the ship's ready I'll have to move on, but we've time to talk for a while. How are things with you?"

The conversation flowed easily as the two men exchanged the news and gossip of the years that had parted them, and Kirk found himself once more falling under the spell of Finnegan's exuberant personality. He had always secretly liked the man, despite their youthful rivalry. For a moment he felt tempted to tell Finnegan about the time on the shore leave planet when he had achieved at last his old ambition to flatten his nemesis, but he felt that this was not the time - he was enjoying the conversation too much to stir up old feuds.

"And would you believe it?" Finnegan said suddenly. "I'm married." He handed over a wallet of pictures. "That's Donna and the kids. They're back on Earth right now - it's not fair to drag

them around with me."

"What about...?" Kirk nodded discretely towards the girl at the bar.

"Just one of the perks of the job. There are a hundred like her. But Donna's something special, isn't she?"

"Yes, indeed," Kirk murmured appreciatively, understanding the pride in Finnegan's voice as he studied the face of the serene, beautiful woman who was his wife, posing with three children in a garden that could only exist on Earth. And he wondered, with a touch of envy, how Finnegan, being so lucky, could feel the need for the sort of expensive companion who travelled with him. He expressed nothing of that feeling, only remarking as he returned the picture, "I envy you. You're a fortunate man."

"Yes, I have everything I could want. I've had to work for it, of course, but I have as much money as I'll ever need, a wonderful family, and a home of my own at last."

"Lucky," Kirk commented again, with a faint sigh.

Finnegan eyed him thoughtfully for a moment, then leaned forward.

"Jimmy, meeting you like this was a surprise, but perhaps it'll mean good luck for both of us. Have you ever thought of leaving Starfleet?"

"Leave Starfleet? No, I haven't," Kirk said.

"Well, think about it now. I'm offering you a job working with me. We'll make a good team. I can use someone I can trust completely. The competition is fierce in my line; you'd be an asset to the company, and you'd be well paid. Wouldn't you like to have a settled life, get married, raise a family of your own?"

"I don't think..." Kirk began, but Finnegan interrupted him.

"Don't refuse at once - think about it for a few days." He handed Kirk a card. "That's my personal number; it'll reach me any time, anywhere. All I ask is that you consider my proposition, and call me. It could mean a lot to both of us."

One of the hostesses approached the table. "Excuse me, Mr. Finnegan, your pilot is ready."

"Right, I'm coming. Sorry, Jimmy, I'll have to go. Don't forget now - call me."

"I will," Kirk promised.

For a moment the two men looked at each other, then rose and shook hands.

"So long, Jimmy. It's been good to see you."

"For me, too," Kirk replied. "Takes you back, doesn't it?"

"To the Academy? Were we ever that young? Well, we've both changed since those days. See you."

With a final wave Finnegan was gone, surrounded by his attentive associates, and Kirk sat down again, feeling more desolate than ever after Finnegan's lively company.

He brooded quietly, turning Finnegan's card over and over in his fingers, as though it was a form of talisman. The offer was... tempting... and he considered its implications carefully.

To leave Starfleet; to lead a normal life with a regular schedule; to have a home at last... a wife, children, all the things he could never enjoy while he remained on the Enterprise. Oh, it was possible to marry, but it was hardly fair. He'd see his family only rarely, there would be long partings.

To live on Earth again, or at least some peaceful settled planet; to have friends, knowing that they would always be there, would not be exposed to the constant danger that threatened all his relationships now; to allow himself to love without the constant fear of loss; to have a secure, settled, future. Yes, it was tempting.

There would be sacrifices, of course. The change and excitement he had always loved; the subtle enjoyment of command; the Enterprise, so much his that she seemed at times an extension of his body; his companions, loved and trusted for so long; all these he would lose.

Which to choose? It was so difficult suddenly to decide. Finnegan's offer had woken something in him, something he had long thought lost, an almost unconscious homesickness. Instinctively he knew that he stood now at a crossroads in his life, for whichever path he chose there would be no turning back.

Finnegan, with the safety, the security, the settled future he offered? Or Starfleet, with all its excitement and danger? He could not have both, and at this moment he could not be sure what he really wanted.

The low murmur of conversation at the next table finally broke into his concentration, and he turned idly, seeking its source. Two of his fellow passengers were deep in discussion.

"... completely ruthless," one of them was saying. "Well within the law, of course, but I know of several people who've been forced out of business by the Orion Corporation."

"That's so," his companion agreed. "It happened to a cousin of mine. As you say, completely legal - but a business he'd spent his life building up was just taken out from under him."

"Mind you," the first speaker said after a moment, "I don't envy Finnegan for all his power and influence. It's well known his wife's on the point of leaving him - had enough of his playing around, I suppose - and it's said he can't keep a friend."

"A terrible epitaph for any man. I may not have his power, but at least I haven't ruined good men to get where I am."

There was a murmur of agreement and the talk turned to other

matters, while Kirk sat mulling over what he had heard. It might have only been gossip, of course, but it made him think. Was he deceiving himself into thinking that Finnegan had changed over the years? There had always been a strong streak of egoism in the man, even in their Academy days. Oh, he had been an amusing companion, but thinking back Kirk remembered all too clearly the many indications that in a crisis Finnegan had always considered himself before others. It seemed he still did so.

That lovely woman, those fine children... yes, Finnegan could lose them by his own fault, as easily as he lost his friends.

He, Kirk, was luckier. The Enterprise was a stern mistress, but an honest one - she might take a man's life, but never his honour. She offered danger, of course, but was there not also danger in the life he contemplated? More subtle, certainly, a threat to his integrity rather than to his life, and therefore more difficult to combat - and if he succumbed he would be destroyed no less surely.

Kirk considered, more critically this time, the face of the man who had just left. Finnegan still laughed, still seemed carefree... but was there not a coldness now behind his eyes, lines of arrogance at the corners of his mouth that had not been there before?

With a sigh Kirk looked down at his clasped hands, more than ever confused. There was no denying that he was tempted. Where should he look now for guidance?

Aware of movement at his side he looked up into a familiar, impassive face, at a man who waited patiently, unwilling to interrupt his concentration.

"Spock!" he exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

The Vulcan hesitated uncharacteristically. "The work on the computer was completed much earlier than I had anticipated," he said at last. "It was not as complex as I was led to believe. It occurred to me that perhaps, after all, I should take leave, and I decided to return to Vulcan. My ship made a brief stop here, and I learned by chance that you were delayed. I wondered..." He paused again, then continued shyly, "I wondered if you would care to visit my home instead? My parents are away, and we would be alone... Of course, if you prefer..." His voice faded.

Kirk looked up into the patient eyes; he was not deceived by those last words, knowing the truth that neither would admit openly

Spock was as lonely as he; hoping for the Human's company, this was his way of asking for it without seeking to compel agreement. Kirk felt an inner ripple of self-mockery - he had been worrying about loneliness, when all the time he had a friend as loyal as this. He rose eagerly.

"I'd be pleased to, Spock," he said calmly but sincerely, knowing that to display open enthusiasm would only embarrass his friend, but knowing also that his delight was felt and shared by the Vulcan. "Just give me a moment to change my booking."

As he turned from the table he remembered Finnegan's card, which he still held, and paused in the very act of tearing it up.

No, he thought, he would keep it; and if he ever again felt himself guilty of indulging in pointless self-doubt - well, he would only have to look at it to be reminded of this moment, and of the gentle, lonely man who asked only for his friendship.

Poor Finnegan, Kirk thought with genuine pity. Whether the talk is true or not, he has so much. But he doesn't have... Spock.

"Captain?" the Vulcan asked, puzzled by the curiously tender smile that touched his friend's mouth for a moment.

"Nothing, Spock," Kirk replied. "You could say... for a time I stood at a crossroads, and couldn't see the signpost. But I know the way now."

"Satisfactory," the Vulcan commented with - could it be? - the merest touch of complacency.

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THE WATERS OF THE DEAD WORLD

by

Sheila Clark

The planet was a geologist's nightmare. There was no rhyme nor reason to the stratification; various metals veined the same rock, sharing it with precious or semi-precious stones. Granite, basalt and sandstone neighbored each other, while veins of chalk and limestone penetrated them, although the planet was now a lifeless, arid place. Its atmosphere smelt musty, like a room that has been too long unopened.

The existence of chalk and limestone indicated that it must have had life once, even although it might have been confined to long-dried-up seas. Question - what killed this world? Federation scientists were anxious to find out. The Enterprise had been given the task.

Kirk beamed down with a large landing party; the entire geological staff accompanied Spock, who led the investigation. McCoy, who frequently doubled as a biologist, accompanied them. He didn't really mind doubling up duties - it gave him something to do between routine medical examinations; except for the rare injury most of the crew, all excellent physical specimens, remained obstinately healthy. Kirk was frankly glad to have McCoy along; what Spock thought of it was uncertain.

Now McCoy busied himself searching for any trace of plant life, however primitive, that there might be. He wandered away from the others, who were all busy collecting rocks and searching for fossils.

A few minutes later, he called to Spock.

The Vulcan moved towards him and found him standing on the bank of a fast-flowing river which erupted from the rocks and vanished again into a cave some hundred yards further on.

"The rain - such as there is - must soak into the ground pretty quickly," McCoy commented.

"There can be very little rain," Spock replied. "The terrain is too dry, the soil composed of dust. If there was any moisture in the atmosphere the soil would be better compacted."

"So where does that water come from?" McCoy asked. "It must flow into underground lakes, since there's no reservoir of surface water; but where does it come from?"

"A good point, Doctor," Spock admitted. He pointed his tricorder at the water. "Nothing unusual about its composition," he said. "It is ordinary water, somewhat hard. See if you can get a sample of it, Doctor."

McCoy nodded. "I was just going to do that," he retorted. He leaned down - and the bank gave way under his weight.

He hadn't even hit the water before Spock was diving in after him.

One of the geologists moved into sight just in time to see what had happened. He ran forward and saw Spock, swimming strongly, nearing the feebly struggling McCoy before they were both swept into the mouth of the cave, and vanished with the river.

Kirk, informed of what had happened, ordered an immediate sensor scan of the surface, trying to find if the river reappeared. There was no sign that it did.

He ordered the survey to proceed as planned, as indeed he had to, while the sensors continued to scan the surface, loath to order the search to stop, delaying the inevitable moment when he must admit that his friends were dead.

Spock caught up with McCoy just inside the cave, while there was still enough light for him to see the Human. He caught McCoy's arm, then transferred his grip so that he was holding the surgeon firmly round the chest while he leaned backwards. McCoy, his trust in Spock unspoken but infinite, relaxed and let the Vulcan support him.

They were swept on into the dark. Ahead of them, the sound of the water suddenly seemed louder. McCoy turned his head slightly towards Spock.

"A waterfall?" he shouted.

"I think so," Spock replied. His grip tightened as they felt themselves falling... falling... then with a crash they hit the water and were beaten under by the force of the river behind them.

Spock struck out wildly with his legs and his free arm, his grip on McCoy unslackened, trying to fight clear of the terrible pressure. He felt McCoy go limp, but not for a moment did he consider letting go. He was only aware of a grim determination that when they were found, alive or dead, it would be together. His lungs bursting, he found himself unable to hold his breath any longer, and gasped in a choking lungful of water. He tried to cough, tried to breathe, and as he felt consciousness slipping away he tightened his grip on the unconscious McCoy still more.

Spock regained consciousness to a burning pain in his chest. He raised his head, coughed, vomited water; realised that he was lying half floating, half supported by a bed of shingle. Apparently the water level had fallen, leaving him partially grounded; but an unwary movement would set him afloat again. At his side, still clasped in his arm, was a still, cold body.

Very cautiously, he pulled himself further onto the shingle, hauling McCoy up beside him. Once he was satisfied that they were clear of the water, he bent over McCoy, relieved to find that although the Human was deeply unconscious, he was still breathing. In the pitch dark it was impossible to see if McCoy was injured; all Spock could be sure of was that he could feel no injuries - for what that was worth. But McCoy was deathly cold. Spock shivered himself. Both were soaked; and it was icily cold in the cave. If

McCoy was not to die of exposure, he must do something to warm him - and also, incidentally, himself. He lay down beside the Human and held him in his arms, trying to warm them both with their combined body heat, aware that it might be kinder to let McCoy die without regaining consciousness, that they were probably doomed to die of cold and hunger here, deep underground, far beyond range of the Enterprise's sensors, excellent though they were.

McCoy, however, was not as deeply unconscious as Spock thought. He became aware of feeling cold and wet, of lying on a hard, uncomfortable, lumpy bed; and of arms round him and a warm body beside him. He knew it must be Spock; and lay for a second enjoying the illusion that the Vulcan actually did like him before he moved.

"Spock?"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"What happened? After we went over the fall?" Somewhat to his surprise, Spock did not move away the moment he spoke.

"I am uncertain, Doctor. We both lost consciousness. I revived about an hour ago. We appear to have been left on a bank of shingle by the river level dropping, but there is no way of knowing if this is a large or comparatively small cave. I lost my tricorder, but even if I had retained it, I could not read it without light. I consider it unlikely that, unaided, we can find any means of escape. We must depend on the Captain's determination to retrieve us, if he can in fact detect us so far underground."

"And this?" McCoy touched Spock's arm lightly, not sure if the Vulcan would take the question as criticism or not.

"The simplest method of preserving our body heat, Doctor."

"And are we just going to lie here until something - or anything - happens?"

Spock hesitated for some moments before he answered. "Doctor - without light we can see nothing. I remember reading once of a cave on your Earth which was used, centuries ago, as a prison. The prisoners were not guarded; they were simply left without light. They knew there was a way out - but there is no record that any of them ever managed to escape. We do not even know if there is any exit other than the one by which we entered this cave."

"You're not just giving up?"

"No, Doctor. I merely point out that our chances of returning to the outer world, unaided, are extremely slight. If we leave here, we might in fact wander deeper into the mountainside. The Captain may, after all, try to mount a rescue via the river."

"Aren't they most likely to think we're dead, when they reach the fall?"

"Yes."

"Then there's no logic in staying here."

"I agree, Doctor. If there is a cave leading from here, we can at least attempt to follow it out."

They scrambled to their feet. The chill hit them afresh now that they were no longer keeping each other warm.

"Spock - we'd better keep hold of each other. Make sure we're not separated."

Spock reached out, gripped McCoy's arm, ran his fingers down to the Human's hand, and grasped it. "We should be standing with our backs to the river," he said. "However, it is difficult to retain an adequate sense of direction in these conditions of sensory deprivation. Go carefully."

They began to edge their way carefully forward, both terribly aware that the ground could fall away beneath their feet at any moment and plunge them into a neck-breaking fall down a deep hole.

Eventually they reached a rock wall.

"It is not a very big cave," Spock said. "I estimate we have travelled no further than ten to twelve yards."

"Finding our way anywhere is going to take a long time," McCoy muttered.

"Did you think it wouldn't? Let us try going to the right."

They began to make their cautious way along the wall. The sound of the water became fractionally louder.

"I believe we are moving back towards the river," Spock commented.

A few minutes later he was proved right when their feet splashed into water.

They made slightly better time going back, since they knew there were no holes, but once they reached the point where Spock reckoned they had first made contact with the rock wall, they had to slow down again.

They moved slowly onward, inching each foot forward in turn, each ready to pull back instantly if he felt space under it. Spock kept his right hand in contact with the wall as he went, his senses straining to see, to hear something; but hearing only the shuffle of their feet and the clatter of the shingle against the background rush of the water and seeing only blackness.

This time, though, they did seem to be going someplace; the sound of the water became fainter as they went. Whether they had in fact found a passage leading away from the river, or whether they were merely following a huge curve which would eventually lead them back to it, they had no way of knowing.

The shingle under their feet gave way to rock; a smooth rock surface, easy to walk on; but they still dared not assume that there were no holes.

"What do you suppose smoothed the floor?" McCoy asked, more for the sake of breaking the silence than for any other reason.

"Water," Spock answered. "Either we are following the old bed of a water-course, or the river, centuries ago, rose this high when it was in spate - it may even still do so, since we have reason to

think that its level dropped after we entered it - and the swirl of water wore down the rock."

They groped their way onwards until they could hardly hear the river.

"I believe we are climbing slightly," Spock said after another short silence.

"I think you're right," McCoy agreed. then gave a sharp exclamation as something touched his arm lightly.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"Something touched me - something alive!" McCoy said. "There it is again."

"It has touched me as well," Spock confirmed. "In fact, it is now holding my arm."

"Is someone there?" McCoy asked, knowing even as he spoke how stupid the question was. But there was no answer.

"If it was something sentient," Spock said, "it would have spoken by now. I can hear nothing... or - " He broke off, straining his ears. "A faint, high pitched squeaking sound - higher, much higher, than a bat's voice, just at the upper limit of my hearing. If it is an attempt at communication, it is too high up the register for even my ears, and our voices must be by far too deep to register on their ears."

"Can it possibly be anything intelligent?" McCoy asked. "There was no sign of life on the surface; no sign that the planet ever rose higher in the evolutionary scale than sea creatures. And even if it did - how can anything exist down here, without light?"

"There are precedents for that from several planets," Spock told him, "including your Earth - although I admit that they are all fairly low down the evolutionary scale. There are, for example, blind fish in your America, which have lived so long in darkness that they no longer have eyes; yet they find their way about, feed, breed, in apparently complete comfort."

The unseen hands were pulling at them now; they yielded, and went on, quicker now that they were being guided - though to what they were being guided, they had no idea.

"The high voices must act like a bat's guidance system," Spock postulated, "allowing them to find their way safely."

"Wonder what they eat?"

"I would hesitate to suggest, Doctor, that we might figure on their menu, but we cannot overlook the possibility."

"If they did mean to eat us, wouldn't they kill us first?"

"Do Terrans kill cattle before taking them to market?" Spock asked. "Much easier and more logical to walk the prey to the slaughter house, wouldn't you think?"

"Except that prey our size must be pretty scarce," McCoy replied. "They mightn't realise that we could be eaten."

"Food must be in short supply down here," Spock said.
"Anything living, large or small, could be regarded as food."

"Could anything grow here?"

"Fungi, perhaps."

"Which is vegetable. Vegetarians - I'm sure you'll agree - would be nauseated at the very thought of eating any animal."

"A good point, Doctor. We will have to wait and see."

After a while, they became aware of a feeling of spaciousness.

"What is it?" McCoy asked.

"There seems to be more bat-squeaking here than there was," Spock replied. "I would speculate that we are in a larger cavern; one where there is a large gathering of these beings, whatever they are."

The touch left their arms. They stood, waiting, each deriving a degree of comfort from the continued clasp of their hands although neither would ever admit it, would ever admit to anything but a purely practical reason for retaining the clasp. Then the light touch came again.

"It feels slightly different," Spock commented as they were urged forward again.

"Different guides?" McCoy suggested.

"It could be," Spock admitted.

They were climbing again, more steeply now. At last, ahead, they became aware of a faint - a very faint - glow. Their guides slowed. Then the touch left them once more.

"An exit?" McCoy suggested.

They moved towards the light, slowly at first then more confidently as their eyes obtained enough light to see by. Their hands separated as they neared the opening.

Outside, the sun blazed down on dry rocks and dust. They were high up a mountainside, and from their viewpoint they could see nothing but more rocks and more dust. The heat was welcome after the chill of the caves.

McCoy sat down on a rock. "I'm tired," he admitted. "And you must be too - if you're honest with yourself. We'd be better to rest for a while before we try to find the rest of the landing party - wherever it is."

Spock sat near him. "Yes," he agreed simply. He looked round. "I think our best plan is to climb higher; we may see someone from a higher viewpoint. And if we get high enough, we'll even manage to see over the other side."

"I wonder who those beings were," McCoy mused.

Aboard the Enterprise, Kirk had the main viewscreen showing the image the sensors were picking up. He sat in the command chair staring at the arid landscape, wondering where the river had come from, where it eventually went, as the sensors swung over and over the area centred on the river. Sulu and Chekov watched too, but their attention was beginning to wander.

Suddenly Kirk gave an exclamation. In the colourless landscape below, two spots of blue had suddenly appeared as if by magic.

"Life form readings, sir!" Carstairs exclaimed from the science console. "Human and Vulcan."

"Mr. Sulu - let the transporter room have the co-ordinates. I'm going down."

Spock and McCoy, trying to summon up the energy to move, heard the hum of the transporter and stared unbelievably as Kirk materialised beside them.

"Spock! Bones! Are you all right?" He gripped their arms as if trying to satisfy himself that they were indeed there.

A search party equipped with powerful lights went into the cave to try to find the beings who had helped them; but they found nothing.

"I'm not surprised," McCoy commented. "They left us as soon as there was any light at all. It may hurt them."

So they never did find out anything about the mysterious race who inhabited the cave. They had only supposition.

As they prepared to leave the planet, having finished the survey -

"I am curious about one thing," Spock said. "What did these beings think we were? If they were the descendants of people who once lived on the surface - even though we found no signs that anyone ever did - did they believe us to be their remote cousins who still lived there?"

"They might think that of you, Spock," McCoy began. "Your physiology is odd enough for anything -"

"Perhaps it is as well we were unable to communicate," Spock cut in. "Had they been able to understand us, your brand of illogic, Doctor, might well have led them to leave us there."

He nodded politely to the indignant McCoy and moved back to his station at the library computer.

Kirk chuckled to himself. "Mr. Sulu - course two nine four mark seven, warp four."

The Enterprise swung gracefully out of orbit en route to her next destination.

Telemetry 76, Beyond Antares.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

TO FEAR NO EVIL

by

Sheila Clark

The only person more outspoken than Kirk about having to take part in diplomatic missions was McCoy. It was certain that the crew of the Enterprise all detested the protocol, spit and polish such missions entailed. Even Spock had been known to express distaste for such missions, which he regarded as an intrusion in the more important things of life. Therefore, when the Enterprise was selected to provide transport for Ambassador Stewart and his daughter to Delta Aurigae III, Kirk and his men were a great deal less than enthusiastic.

Ambassador Stewart, however, soon let it be seen that he was not going to be any trouble to them during the trip. After the formal dinner Kirk felt he always had to offer to visiting dignitaries, the Ambassador spent very little time with the crew. Both he and his daughter remained in their cabins. Just what they found to do there was a mystery; any computer or viewscreen activity would have been noticed by Spock. It was easy to assume that Stewart was studying details about his new job or the new planet that was his destination. But it seemed that he was not.

Several days from their destination, there was a frantic general call on the intercom from Miss Stewart.

"Help me! Someone help me, please!"

Kirk headed straight for the Ambassador's quarters and found the girl sobbing over the unconscious body of her father. He called for McCoy who responded immediately. He gave Stewart a quick examination and glanced at Kirk, shaking his head slightly.

"Miss Stewart," he said, turning to the girl, "I'll need to take your father to sickbay for a more detailed examination. He's seriously ill."

The girl raised tear-stained eyes from her hands and nodded with an obvious effort. Both men were uncomfortably aware of her concern and grief.

In sickbay, McCoy completed his examination of the man. His face was set in grim lines as he reported to Kirk.

"He's dying, Jim, and there's nothing I can do for him. I could keep him on total life support for a while, but that's about all."

"What's wrong with him?"

McCoy shook his head. "All vital organs are failing to function, quite rapidly and with no obvious reason. You could liken him to a clock that's running down. Only there's no way to wind him up again. I've never seen anything like it."

"Have you told his daughter yet?"

McCoy shook his head. "No. I suppose I should; someone will have to, and I suppose it'll be better to tell her now, give her some warning... "

"I'll tell her, Bones." Kirk turned to the door, hesitated and glanced back. "How long?"

"Soon," McCoy replied sombrely. "That's as much as I can say."

The girl seemed to have regained a measure of control over herself; she was white-faced and trembling, but reasonably composed.

Kirk looked at her sympathetically, and decided it would be kinder to come straight to the point. "I'm sorry, Miss Stewart," he said softly. "I've just come from sickbay. Dr. McCoy tells me you father is dying. There's nothing he can do."

"I see," she said quietly. "May I see him?"

"I don't see why not," Kirk replied. "I don't know if he is conscious or not, but - "

"He is conscious," she replied.

They left her alone with her father. She stayed for a few minutes and then the Ambassador sent her away. He called McCoy back in.

"The First Officer is Vulcan," he said; it was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes," McCoy answered, puzzled.

"I want to see him."

McCoy lifted his eyebrows, but turned to the intercom. "McCoy to bridge. Mr. Spock, would you report to sickbay? Ambassador Stewart wants to see you."

He left Spock alone with Ambassador Stewart.

The dying man looked up at Spock weakly. "Mr. Spock... I understand you are half Vulcan, half Human?"

"That is correct, sir."

"You know the difficulties such a... hybrid... encounters."

Spock stiffened slightly at the man's statement. "Yes, sir, I know," he replied defensively.

"My daughter is also a hybrid. Her mother... was of a race living on a world that has no contact with the Federation. They were - are - an incredibly innocent race; contact with the outside Galaxy would destroy them. I will not say how I found them, but I chose not to reveal their existence to the Federation. I married there and remained with them until my wife died, then returned with

my daughter to Earth. During my years as an Ambassador she has always accompanied me.

"Mr. Spock, she does not know that she is only half-Terran; she was only two when her mother died. She will have difficulties - her mother's race is telepathic, but my genes in her have weakened her shielding and her control. I learned how to control when I lived there... I have been shielding her since we came back to live and work in the Federation. But I am no longer able to shield her." The man paused for a moment, then -

"Help her, Spock. Please help her. She will need all the help you can give her. Take her to Vulcan. Your people can teach her... She cannot go back to her mother's world, for I will not betray them by telling anyone where they may be found."

"Very well, Ambassador. I will do what you wish."

"Don't tell anyone except your people."

"I will probably have to tell Dr. McCoy, and perhaps Captain Kirk. But you can trust them implicitly."

Stewart hesitated. "Very well," he sighed. "If you must, you must." He closed his eyes.

Spock watched him for a moment, then turned to the door. "Doctor?"

McCoy entered the room. Even as he walked over to the Ambassador's bed, the needles on the diagnostic panel slid to zero.

A scream sounded inside his head. Spock's hands went to his ears, then his fingers slid to his temples and he concentrated. He relaxed as McCoy's face tightened with grief. But it was not an easy relaxation; he looked more as if he were fighting for self control. McCoy barely noticed; the feeling of desolate grief that welled up inside him was comparable only to the way he felt the day he first found out that his wife hated him.

Spock looked at McCoy, seeing the anguish on his face. He reached out to him. "Bones... be one with me," he whispered, his hands firm on McCoy's temples. "Whatever this is, it is not our thoughts. We are aware of it, but it is not ours."

McCoy gasped, drew a deep breath. "Thanks, Spock. What caused that?"

"I believe, Miss Stewart's grief at her father's death."

"But she doesn't even know yet."

"I think you will find that she does."

McCoy looked concerned. "Will everyone on the ship... feel this?"

"I would think so."

They looked at each other. Subjected to this wild grief, feeling it inside their heads - no-one on the ship would be able to

function properly.

"How many... How many can you help, Spock?" McCoy asked finally.

"Not very many," Spock replied. "The Captain, Mr. Scott, Mr. Sulu, Mr. Chekov... Miss Uhura, too; they must be helped. But I do not think I can help more than those."

"We can't run a ship with seven people!" McCoy exclaimed.

"We will have to attempt it," Spock said quietly.

The sickbay door opened. Kirk stumbled in, his face a mask of sorrow, tears streaming down it. Spock looked at him, moved straight to him, fingers outstretched. His grief assuaged, Kirk stared in horror at his friends.

"What caused that?"

"We believe it to be Miss Stewart's grief. Her father is dead."

Kirk stared first at Spock, then at McCoy. "Everyone I passed was..."

"Yes, they would be," Spock told him, a little grimly. "Doctor, we need a full medical report on Miss Stewart as soon as possible. According to what her father told me, she is only half Human, and her mother's race was telepathic. She has no control, he said; he had been shielding her. But now that he is dead, there is no-one to shield her emotions from the rest of us."

"Can't you?" Kirk asked.

"I can shield some of the crew, enough to keep the ship operating, but I do not know if I can link with her. Although she looks Human, her mind may be too alien. That is why I need to know as much as possible about her metabolism as soon as possible."

McCoy nodded. "I'll get on to it right away."

"You get up to the bridge, Spock," Kirk directed. "Try to shield Scotty, Sulu and Chekov at least"

Spock nodded and turned to the door, Kirk at his heels. McCoy took a deep breath and headed for the stricken girl's cabin. Officially she did not yet know of her father's death. He would have to tell her... and he balked at the thought of going any nearer to her than he already was. The mind meld had helped, but it hadn't wholly banished the despair and violent grief McCoy sensed in the back of his mind as emanating from the girl. He was afraid that the nearer he got to the source, the greater those feelings would be.

He hesitated again outside her door and had to force his hand to the buzzer. He got no reply - had barely expected one. Using his medical over-ride, he went in.

The waves of grief washed over him anew, but the meld at least helped him to control it. He put a sympathetic hand on the girl's shoulder.

He was startled when she jerked fearfully away. He felt her

panic and jumped back involuntarily.

"Miss Stewart," he said gently. She paid no attention; he realised his voice had not penetrated her sorrow. "Miss Stewart!" he repeated, louder. She raised tear-stained eyes to him.

"I'm sorry, Miss Stewart," he said, taking refuge in formality. He decided that it would be futile to pretend that he didn't know she already knew about her father.

He felt her uncertainty and realised that part of her emotional state was due to her fear of the future. She had always accompanied her father; he had made the decisions always...

"You'll manage," he said softly. "Have you no other relatives?"

There was no spoken answer; but he knew that the reply was negative.

"Will you come with me?" he asked. "I may be able to help you."

Her fear struck him like a blow. He recoiled, then forced control on himself again, glad yet again of Spock's assistance, of his solid presence in his mind.

"I can help you," McCoy insisted, gently but firmly. "I won't hurt you, I promise you."

She looked at him, shivering, but there was no recoil this time. She got up and began to move towards the door.

McCoy breathed a sigh of relief as he followed her. Her grief had not abated, but at least the fear was less.

As they went along the corridor to the elevator, they passed several of the crew - men and women. They seemed to be attempting to carry out their duties, but all were weeping uncontrollably. McCoy looked at them, concerned but knowing that there was nothing he could do for them at this moment.

Once in sickbay, he called Christine Chapel. Tears were pouring down her face when she joined him, but she was making a valiant effort to control herself.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," she managed.

"Not your fault," McCoy said gruffly. "You're getting the backlash of Miss Stewart's grief."

He turned back to the unhappy girl, reaching for a hypo as he did so. "Miss Stewart," he said reassuringly, "I'm going to give you a mild sedative. It'll help you to relax a little."

She shrank back again and her fear hit him like a blow. He fought for control again as the door opened and Kirk and Spock came back in. Kirk was again showing extreme grief and some fear. McCoy stared at him.

"I had to break the link with the Captain," Spock explained. "I could not maintain a meld with so many persons; and it was more important to have Mr. Scott, Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov, as well as

yourself, functioning reasonable normally. But I am aware that Miss Stewart's reactions are getting more... unrestrained. Fear has been added to her grief."

"I know, Spock. She got scared when I asked her to come with me, and again when I suggested a sedative. It's as if she's afraid of me - afraid of people. I gather that her father always kept her with him - she probably doesn't know how to deal with other people."

"I believe you are correct, Doctor," Spock agreed. "I have tried to keep her influence on my mind to a minimum, but I have been aware of a fluctuation in the emotional reaction, with a peak very recently..."

By now Christine, not sure of what was going on but having grasped that the sobbing Miss Stewart was somehow at the root of it, had moved to the girl's side. She put an arm around her shoulders, comforting her, and was chilled by the girl's reaction. Miss Stewart stiffened as if she was remaining still by sheer willpower. She very clearly did not welcome the physical contact. Personal unhappiness at the rejection, plus the jumble of emotions Christine was receiving from the weeping girl, was almost unbearable; yet Christine persevered.

"We want to help you," the nurse murmured between her own sobs. "Please trust us. No-one is going to hurt you. Please... what is your name? It's much friendlier if we know your name."

There was no response - or rather, no verbal response. Only a renewed upsurge of grief. Kirk, tragedy on his face, looked at McCoy.

"Bones - you have to sedate her."

"I know, Jim. But I don't want to scare her further. Everyone will suffer if she's scared - don't forget that. I could try sedating the crew..." Thoughtful, he picked up the hypo and gave Kirk a shot. The grief on the Captain's face relaxed a little.

"That is better," Kirk said.

McCoy crossed to Christine and gave her a shot. She glanced at him gratefully. "You see?" she said to Miss Stewart. "We want to give you the same thing that Dr. McCoy has given me. It doesn't hurt. It will help, I promise you. He wouldn't have given it to the Captain or me if it was going to harm you."

Her reassurances were ignored. The bereaved girl's fear and misery continued unabated. Christine looked over Miss Stewart's head at McCoy with an expression that clearly said, *What else can we do?*

The surgeon glanced at Spock. "Can't you help her?"

"Doctor, she is already terrified by Nurse Chapel's physical contact with her. She would reject any attempt on my part to touch her."

"Leave Miss Stewart with Nurse Chapel, Bones," Kirk ordered. "Sedatives all round the crew. At least that'll keep them functioning. We can think what's best to do with her later."

McCoy nodded. He turned to the intercom. "McCoy here. All

medical staff report to me in sickbay immediately."

One by one the rest of the medical staff began to arrive, Dr. M'Benga first. Once sedated, M'Benga relaxed visibly. McCoy explained quickly what had happened, and left him to see to the sedation of the nurses and the crew. Then the Chief Surgeon returned to the immediate problem.

He found that Christine had finally persuaded Miss Stewart to lie on one of the beds; Kirk and Spock were sitting beside it. Both were looking helpless. Christine had settled for holding her patient's hand, but even this minimal contact obviously worried the Ambassador's daughter.

"What I don't understand is *why* she's so scared of us," Kirk was saying. He glanced from Spock to McCoy. "You two may not wholly receive it, but fear is definitely predominant in her mind now. I find myself shrinking away from contact with anyone. I'm having to force myself to sit even this close to Spock. I'm feeling afraid of him, yet I know it's *her* fear."

"I think it's sexual," Christine interjected. "I can... recognise certain... certain elements in her attitude. She's less afraid of me than she is of you and Mr. Spock, Captain; but she's making me afraid of both of you, and it is definitely a fear of you as men. It's an attitude a lot of girls have at some stage in their lives, but they usually get over it a lot sooner than this."

"Do you mean she's afraid we'll... assault her?" Kirk asked blankly.

"I'm afraid so," she replied.

"But... "

"There's no justification for it," Christine finished. "We know that, Captain, but she doesn't."

"Can't you make her realise that we won't hurt her?"

Christine shook her head sadly and McCoy cut in. "Her father protected her, Jim. She was never away from him. Jim - were you ever lost as a child? Wandered away from your mother in town, got lost in a crowd? Away from everyone familiar?"

"Maybe. I don't remember it if I was."

"Well, anyway, that's how she's feeling. But the only figure familiar to her is dead. She *can't* be found, and she knows it. Of course she's terrified. I can understand that; but that doesn't help me find a way to help her."

M'Benga came back in. "Everyone's sedated, Doctor."

"Thanks, M'Benga. Keep tabs on the situation. You can use your own condition as a guide. As soon as you feel the emotional effects are getting too strong, give out another round of sedatives."

"Yes, Doctor." He left the room again and McCoy looked helplessly at the others.

"Have you given her a medical inspection yet, Doctor?" Spock

asked.

"No I haven't. And if you want to know why not, think about it for a moment. I don't even know if she's ever had a physical in her entire life."

"If she has, there should be a report on it somewhere in Starfleet's records," Spock suggested.

McCoy looked at Christine. "You're not really doing much good there, Christine. Go and check the records, would you?"

The nurse nodded and left the room. There was silence until she returned, each man occupied with his own thoughts. Kirk in particular was strained since he felt her fear more strongly than either of the others. He was afraid of Spock and McCoy, yet a corner of his mind was still uncontrolled by her, insisting that his friends were to be trusted and that he was still in command of some part of his being. In addition, however, he was afraid of himself.

McCoy saw Kirk's almost imperceptible withdrawal towards the door, as if he were trying to escape from himself. He opened his mouth to appeal to Spock, then closed it again. The Vulcan was already strained to his limit, protecting four of them as well as shielding himself. Kirk had considered that he was less important to protect than those who were being helped, yet...

Christine came back, carrying a tape. "She had a full physical along with her father when Ambassador Stewart was selected for this mission," she informed them. "These are the results."

McCoy slipped a tape into the viewer and they studied it. "According to this, Miss Stewart reads completely Terran normal," he reported.

"That is not accurate," Spock commented.

"Spock, how could it be anything else?" McCoy asked.

"According to Mr. Stewart, his wife was humanoid but not Human," Spock repeated. "Tell me, Doctor, can you think of any race that is exactly the same as Terrans, physically? Consider myself. Do I conform to Vulcan norms exactly? My physical type is Vulcan, *but is it exact?*"

"No," McCoy said, almost reluctantly. "There are Human factors..."

"I venture to suggest that the same should be the case with Miss Stewart."

McCoy considered for a moment. "Yes," he said at last. "It *should* be. But this physical was given her at the Surgeon General's headquarters, since it was tied in with an Ambassadorial mission. It *must* be accurate, the Federation's best medical staff is assigned here - and you can't fool medical scanners. If there's anything at all odd, it shows up somewhere."

"Not always, Doctor. Do you remember Mr. Harbi? His

aberration did not show up on any test - it required telepathic contact to reveal it."

"But these results aren't on any abnormal medical condition. They're physical. You can't fake physical factors."

"You can forge the records," Spock countered. "The Klingon agent we encountered on Station K-7 must have accomplished something of that sort. His physical differences showed up clearly once you actually ran a medical tricorder over him."

"Spock, are you suggesting that Ambassador Stewart forged his daughter's medical records?" Kirk dragged his mind from his enforced misery long enough to ask the question.

"I think it is... possible, Captain."

"I'm not so sure, Spock," McCoy cut in. "The records might have been forged, but what about the doctor who ran the test? How about his observation of the exam? And his memory of it?"

Kirk stiffened. "Mr. Stewart influenced the mind of the doctor who made the examination," he said slowly.

Spock looked at him. "How do you know that, Captain?"

"The knowledge... just came into my mind," he answered, puzzled.

Spock nodded. "Miss Stewart must have known that, subconsciously at least. Our speaking of it brought the knowledge into her conscious mind. And since you are the one here most open to her mental influence... "

Kirk shuddered. "It wouldn't be so bad if her mind weren't so... undisciplined. Or if she weren't so unreasonably frightened," he said.

McCoy glanced at him. "What can you hear from her mind?" he asked curiously. All he had felt during the time before Spock protected him had been a mixture of fear and grief. Now, apparently, other thoughts were emerging.

Kirk shook his head. "There aren't any words for a lot of the emotions," he answered. "Fear... grief... but under those, a longing for security. Memories of security..." His voice trailed off.

"Can you detect what she may think of as providing security?" Spock asked.

Kirk shook his head. "No, Spock. You might have the ability to reach that memory, I can only detect what she is broadcasting," he reminded the Vulcan.

Moving slowly and steadily, McCoy had by now reached the girl's side, carrying a hypo carefully hidden. He touched her arm gently. She flinched and Kirk jerked sharply away from the others. He had moved as far as the door before he managed to stop.

"It's all right," McCoy said gently. "I'm not going to hurt you. I promise you. This will help you, make you feel better." And as well, he added silently. She shrank back from him,

shuddering. Kirk gave an involuntary whimper of terror that was echoed by Christine as both also shrank back from McCoy. Then McCoy gave her the shot. She relaxed, and so did Kirk and Chapel. McCoy glanced at Spock. "Thanks," he said briefly, and Kirk realised that in that last minute, Spock had been giving McCoy a great deal of protection.

McCoy reached for his scanner and ran it over the girl's body. He grunted, then continued with his examination in silence. When he had finished, he glanced at the others.

"Well, Bones?"

"Physically, she's pretty Human," McCoy replied. "But there are differences, as you suggested there might be, Spock. Not major ones, but enough to register in her blood, including one or two antibodies I've never come across before. Her brain is rather more convoluted than is normal in Terrans, though not as much, in comparison, as in Vulcans. The main difference is an enlargement of what should be the pineal gland; but what its function is, I have no idea. Unless it's what makes her telepathic."

"Most telepathic races have a specific telepathic centre in their brains, Doctor," Spock put in. "You could easily be right."

Kirk looked down sadly at the still unconscious girl - McCoy had given her a large dose of sedative. "All right; we can take Mr. Stewart's story as confirmed. That still doesn't tell us what we're to do with her."

"Mr. Stewart did suggest taking her to Vulcan," Spock said. "My people could teach her control, at least. And they could shut out her more undisciplined thoughts."

Kirk took a deep, patient breath. "Spock, how far are we from Vulcan?"

The First Officer lifted an eyebrow. "I take your point, Captain. Unless we can teach her control ourselves, and quickly, we are unlikely to be fit to reach Vulcan. We will all be exhausted trying to cope with her... fears."

"Phantom though they may be," Kirk finished.

"All?" McCoy asked. "Won't you still be able to function, Spock?"

"No, Doctor. I am already strained to my limit protecting four of you as well as myself. I cannot continue doing so for very long."

There was a short silence while they digested this information. None of them had expected this. There was a tendency to think of Spock as being invulnerable. It always came as a shock when they found a situation in which he was not.

"Spock," McCoy said at last. "Couldn't you reach her mind now, while she's unconscious?"

Spock shook his head. "Not while my mind is fully occupied maintaining mind links with so many."

"All right, then, break the link with me. Try to reach her."

If you do, it might mean that we *could* help her."

Spock glanced at Kirk. "Dr. McCoy's suggestion has merit," he admitted, "but I do not think he is the best person to sacrifice protection. We need him in full possession of his faculties for as long as possible in order to keep the ship running as efficiently as possible. I suggest that Mr. Chekov is a better one to sacrifice."

Kirk nodded. "Agreed, Spock. Chekov won't be needed until we need a course change."

"You had better warn him, Captain."

Kirk flicked on the intercom, calling the bridge. While he warned Chekov of his impending return to feeling the girl's presently subdued emotions, McCoy gave Chapel some quiet instructions. The head nurse left sickbay on her way to the bridge; Chekov would at least get the protection of a sedative.

Spock turned his attention to Miss Stewart. He gasped as the maelstrom of emotions hit him afresh, with even greater force than before, since he was now inside her mind and experiencing her emotions, her grief and her fear, at first hand. McCoy shivered with him, also feeling the terror through his link with Spock. Then the Vulcan realised what was happening, and broke off his link with the Humans.

McCoy sighed his relief. On the bridge, Sulu echoed it; in Engineering, Scott drew a deep breath, wondering what on earth had happened, but glad that the sudden influx of disabling emotions had ceased. Sulu glanced at Chekov. "You were the lucky one," he said. "How Spock can stand it inside her head I can't imagine. The feelings we just got passed on from her were... terrible."

Spock was standing it because he had to. He had never experienced such a confused jumble of conflicting emotions from another mind, not even from his Human crewmates. He tried to sort through the unconscious rambling, finding the task impossible. There was no discipline in her mind. The Humans with whom he had occasionally melded were mainly trained Starship personnel, sensible - for the most part - with minds trained to think constructively. They were Humans who felt emotion, expressed emotion, but who had over the years of their lives learned some rudiments of control, so as not to make others suffer from their emotional state when they were afraid or suffering from strong emotional stimuli.

Spock began to probe through her mind, suffering because of his intense respect for the mental privacy of others, but aware that it had to be done. Somewhere there had to be some kind of shield he could activate, to let her learn to keep her thoughts from others. He probed and probed... and found nothing.

Stewart's words came back to him. *My genes in her have weakened her shielding and her control.* Weakened? Left her without any control at all, in fact. Left her without any way of keeping her own feelings from others... and, it seemed, left her unable to read others' minds, or she would have known for certain that they meant her no harm. He felt intensely sorry for this poor wail. There was little that he could do for her after all. He wondered if Stewart himself had known just how weak her control actually was, and decided that he could not have known. He had

just known that it was weak, probably learned that it was so when the girl was still an infant and had set out then to guard her. He had continued to do so by habit, without checking whether her control was improving as she got older.

Spock could appreciate Stewart's wanting to keep his daughter by his side. Vulcans had an intensely strong family feeling, though they would have denied firmly that it had any emotional significance. But even so, he thought that Stewart should have made the attempt years ago, to have his daughter learn control, on Vulcan if necessary. He should have tried to make some arrangement for what should be done with her on the event of his death, for she was no more fit to look after herself than a day-old han'gha.

He probed deeper. Still nothing. He linked on to her subconscious thoughts.

There was something... at last. Faint, distant, even to the subconscious. But the memory was there. Soothing thoughts... love... comfort. He realised that he had found her memories of her dead mother. No wonder they were so faint - she had only been two when her mother died. Could he build on them, those so-faint but happy memories? Teach her through them that other people could be as gentle, as loving? He began to work on drawing the faint mother-memories to the surface of her thoughts, then hesitated. She was grief-stricken at her father's death, the father who had been mother to her as well. How would she react to the conscious reminder of her dead mother? Admittedly she had been only two. Children of two do not normally feel anything greatly save a change in routine. But here they had a telepathic girl with no control. She must have been more than usually conscious of her mother's thoughts. She might have been more affected than he would expect. He decided that he didn't dare draw those memories to the surface.

What else was there? He probed deeper in the same region of her mind. *Darkness... distant flecks of light making pretty patterns. A bright light shining above, a light that changed shape as it travelled quickly across the... sky? The patterns - could they be constellations? And the light, a moon? A moon with an orbit so close to its primary that it ran through its phases in a few hours?*

Watching, Kirk and McCoy saw the Vulcan suddenly tense. He reached out his hand. "Jim?"

Kirk gripped it. "I'm here, Spock."

"Something... to draw on... "

Kirk glanced around helplessly. McCoy moved quickly, fetching a pad and stylus. He tried to give them to Spock, but the Vulcan seemed unaware of him, so he gave them to Kirk, who passed them to the Science Officer. They both watched, fascinated, as the Vulcan began to draw patterns of dots, some large and some small.

At last Spock sighed and raised his head. He looked exhausted. "Miss Stewart is regaining consciousness, Doctor. it might be better to keep her under full sedation for a little longer."

McCoy nodded. While she was unconscious the entire crew had some respite from the battering of her emotions. He gave her another shot.

"How are you feeling, Spock?" Kirk asked anxiously.

"I can... continue to function adequately, Captain," Spock replied. "But I still have work to do." He picked up the pad and studied it intently.

"What is it?" Kirk asked.

"I believe it to be a picture of the night sky as Miss Stewart saw it as a child on her mother's planet. Mr. Stewart would not say where that planet was. He did not want the people there disturbed by contact with the Federation, he said they were so innocent that contact with others could destroy them. I am of the opinion that he was correct; that that is what is wrong with Miss Stewart. She has inherited her mother's innocence, and she is picking up enough of the... the worldly-wise thoughts of the crew to be terrified. Destroyed, if you prefer the expression, for she will inevitably go insane from her fear if we cannot find an answer for her. Her only chance lies on her mother's planet, if we can find it."

"And our only clue is the memory of the night sky as seen by an infant in arms?" McCoy asked caustically.

"It is at least a clue, Doctor," Spock replied imperturbably.

"Spock," Kirk said. "Have you thought that this planet might be even further away from our present position than Vulcan?"

Spock nodded. "I think it extremely probable that it is, Captain, otherwise it would not remain unknown. It must be beyond the furthest limits that Federation vessels have gone."

"Then how did Stewart find it?" McCoy asked.

"He would not say."

McCoy frowned. "You know, considering his daughter's reaction to what you called the crew's 'worldly-wise thoughts', Stewart must have been pretty innocent himself if he was able to stay there for at least three years without creating havoc among the natives."

Kirk ignored the comment, laying it aside for later consideration. "What chance have we of matching the star patterns with any we know if the planet is beyond the scope of Federation influence?" he asked bluntly.

"Even although the area must be unexplored, the stars may have been charted from a distance," Spock replied slowly. He left the room, still carrying the pad.

McCoy looked helplessly at Kirk. "He'll spend God knows how many hours searching the records just in case the stars forming those constellations have been charted from a distance," he said.

Kirk answered simply, "Yes. Because it would appear to be our only chance of helping that girl."

Now that they had Miss Stewart under sedation, things were easier all round. She was still broadcasting some distress, but not enough to render the crew unable to function. McCoy had

reluctantly decided to keep the girl fully sedated; as soon as she regained consciousness, he felt, she would again terrify them all.

They saw nothing of Spock. The Vulcan had shut himself up in his cabin and was steadily working his way through the star charts. He was trying, with the help of the computer, to find even one of the constellations he had seen in Miss Stewart's mind. He reckoned it would take several days to work his way through all the charts; it took even longer than he had anticipated.

As the days passed, McCoy realised that he could not, in all conscience, keep the half alien girl unconscious any longer. He permitted her to regain consciousness, keeping her under light sedation. He left Chapel sitting beside her, although the nurse's presence hadn't seemed to help much on the previous occasion, and kept out of the way to see if the lack of male presence also helped to keep her subdued.

Sure enough it did seem to help a little. Her grief again disturbed the crew, but not excessively so. And this time there was no fear. McCoy took courage from this and risked going in to see her - but his appearance was the immediate sign for her to shrink back in terror again. McCoy himself recoiled and the shock of sudden fear caused several minor accidents as various crew members also instinctively recoiled from anyone they were close to. McCoy swore to himself and withdrew to his office. The fear dwindled to bearable proportions.

The intercom buzzed. McCoy reached for it. "McCoy here."

"What happened, Bones?" came Kirk's voice.

"I thought she might accept my presence," McCoy replied. "I was wrong."

Nor was the terrified girl willing to accept more from Chapel than her passive, unmoving presence. When the nurse tried to move, the fear emanating from Miss Stewart forced her to return to her original position, sitting... watching. She tried to talk to the girl without success; nothing she could say seemed to penetrate the fog of fear enveloping the bereaved girl. She began to wonder what would happen when the next sedation was due.

Just as Chapel had feared, as the sedation began to wear off, the emotional aura from Miss Stewart increased. One of the other nurses appeared, carrying a hypo; McCoy had decided not to risk going in himself. A mental scream sounded inside their heads and Chapel gasped, then noticed that the other nurse was already sedated. McCoy was not a man who made the same mistake, or even a similar mistake, twice. The nurse moved slowly, straight to the bed, and the hypo hissed against Miss Stewart's arm. The terror faded, the girl's eyes closed and she slept again.

The sickbay intercom bleeped wildly. McCoy flicked it on.

"Dr. McCoy to the bridge. Medical emergency!" came Uhura's voice.

"On my way!" McCoy grabbed his medical kit, and ran.

The bridge door swished open to a scene that might have been

wildly confused if the crew had been less able. Uhura sat at her station, looking down to where Chekov bent over Kirk - Kirk, who lay prone beside his chair bleeding from a gash on his head.

"What happened?" McCoy snapped as he bent over the Captain. Chekov looked up.

"He was just sitting down when... when the Stewart girl screamed. At least, I think it must have been her. We all jumped... we weren't expecting it. Captain Kirk... fell off the chair. He hit his head on the chair arm as he fell."

"Uh." The single grunt from McCoy told them very little. He gave Kirk an injection. "Uhura, call sickbay again and get them to send a gurney."

"Yes, Doctor."

As she turned to her board, Sulu asked, "How serious is it, Doctor?"

"I don't know yet. Any head injury can be bad. It could, equally probably, give him nothing worse than a headache. I want him in sickbay, that's all."

The gurney arrived. He placed Kirk on it and took him away.

He was more worried than he had indicated to the crew. The gash on Kirk's head was near the same place as an earlier injury. That could cause problems.

Kirk was lifted onto a bed in the examination room. He was already beginning to toss restlessly and mutter incoherently. McCoy's lips set in a tight line. He was puzzled that the diagnostic readings seemed normal and ran a scanner over Kirk's body. The scan confirmed the readings. Kirk should have been recovering quietly. Something other than the blow to the head was wrong.

Kirk suddenly sat upright and screamed.

McCoy reached over to quieten him and to his utter amazement Kirk jerked away, terror on his face. He shrank back from McCoy.

"Jim! What's wrong with you?"

Kirk stared at him, dread in his eyes.

"Jim!"

Kirk did not seem to comprehend. He continued to stare at McCoy without recognition.

The nurse came back from Miss Stewart. "Doctor, Miss Stewart doesn't seem to be responding to the sedative. She was knocked out for a while, but now she's come round and she seems more frightened than ever." Her eyes fell on Kirk and widened in amazement. "She's behaving... just like the Captain!"

Just like the Captain. So, that was the problem. Kirk was showing the girl's fear. His own mind was possibly still unconscious. McCoy thought more about the problem.

"Was the girl given the same sedative as last time?"

"Yes, Doctor." Her tone said, *Of course.*

She went to the medical cabinet and withdrew the drug. She loaded the hypo and went back. McCoy considered, then gave Kirk a shot - just in time. The mental scream sounded again inside his head. Kirk writhed, his face twisting in agony, but the shot McCoy gave him was effective. He slumped while McCoy was still fighting for control. McCoy moved to the door of the other room.

"How is she?"

"She isn't getting any more confident, Doctor," Chapel said. "If anything she's even more afraid of us now. She fought the sedative... She's scared of being asleep."

McCoy nodded, beginning to understand. "She's terrified of what we might do to her while she's sleeping."

"I think so, Doctor."

"Damn that father! He's ruined her... destroyed her. He may have thought he was being kind, but what he did was cruel. He left her with no personal resources, no ability to mix with other people, he kept her so wholly dependant on him. And because she's a retiring sort, she was happy to let him run her life, happy to be dependent. She'll never be able to adjust to life without him."

"She might find a father substitute," Chapel suggested.

McCoy shook his head. "She's too scared to trust anyone enough to make him a father substitute. If Stewart had actually told her to trust us, she possibly would have. But he didn't." He walked back to Kirk. The Captain was resting more easily now, but every so often he would writhe as if trying to escape from... what? McCoy checked him again and gave him another shot. He could do no more. He hesitated, then reached for the intercom switch. He knew Spock was busy; the Vulcan ought to be left in peace to get on with his work. But he had to be told about Kirk.

"McCoy to Spock."

"Spock here. I am busy, Doctor. Please be brief."

"Jim's had a slight accident. He was taken by surprise when the Stewart girl 'screamed'. He fell and cut his head. He's being affected by the girl even in his semi-conscious state. I have him under sedation and Miss Stewart as well. But she seems to be broadcasting something still. We can't detect it, but he can."

"I will be right down. Spock out."

McCoy switched off. He was leaning frustratedly over the bed when Spock arrived. Spock moved beside him, giving the diagnostic board a quick glance as he surveyed the situation.

"The readings would appear to be normal, Doctor," he commented.

"They are. Jim should be recovering normally. But there are definite mental disturbances. Like that," he added as Kirk's face twisted with fear. "He seems to be reflecting her emotional

state."

Spock looked fractionally disturbed. He left Kirk and went through to look at Miss Stewart.

"Couldn't you meld with her again? Persuade her that we won't hurt her?" McCoy asked from behind him.

Slowly, Spock shook his head. "Her thought processes are too alien," he said. "I managed to make contact once. I learned from that contact how little I could do, how little any Vulcan could do, to help her. There is no point in trying again. I have already obtained from her mind the only information that might be of assistance to us - there is no more I can do, nor any more I can discover."

"What about Jim, then? Could you help him? Separate his thoughts from hers?"

"I will try." He leaned over Kirk, his fingers outstretched. "You are yourself, James Kirk," he whispered. "You have nothing to fear, here on the Enterprise. You do not fear us..." He raised his head. "That should be sufficient, Doctor," he said, lifting his hand from Kirk's face.

McCoy looked down at his Captain. Kirk seemed to be resting more quietly. "What happens now?" he asked.

Spock shook his head. "I am uncertain, Doctor. My research has so far come up with no relevant stellar information." He hesitated, looking at Kirk, then turned for the door. "I am returning to my search, Doctor. I have done all I can to alleviate the Captain's condition. If it is not sufficient, there is nothing further I can do."

He went away, leaving McCoy feeling particularly helpless.

Once again McCoy kept Miss Stewart unconscious. He did not dare let her waken until they found an answer to her fears. However, he did let Kirk regain consciousness.

The Captain opened his eyes to look up at McCoy. "Bones," he murmured.

McCoy grinned at him. "Hello, Jim. How do you feel?"

"Okay."

"Liar."

Kirk grinned guiltily. "I've got a headache. Otherwise I am okay."

"Any mental... confusion"

Kirk shook his head, considering. "No."

"Any memories of mental confusion?"

Again he shook his head. "No."

"Well, that's a good sign... I think."

Kirk frowned. "Hold on, Bones. Why am I here?"

"You had a fall yesterday. Cut your head open and knocked yourself out."

"I see. But why ask me about mental confusion?"

"While you were out, you were picking up Miss Stewart's emotional aura like a mirror," McCoy explained. "Spock had to come and help you."

"Oh. Has he found anything yet?" Kirk asked

"No."

Kirk swung his legs off the bed. McCoy grabbed him. "Hold on, Jim. I haven't passed you as fit yet."

"I'm perfectly all right now, Bones."

"Lie still! Hmmm... the readings seem to agree. But take it easy!" He watched Kirk leave, sighing. *One day, he promised himself, I'll manage to keep Jim in sickbay until he's really ready to be let out, instead of having him virtually sign himself out as soon as possible.*

Kirk went first to the bridge, to check on their position. They were still two days from Delta Aurigae III, where the Ambassador's body was to be buried. Kirk considered leaving Miss Stewart there too, but he was afraid of the diplomatic repercussions of doing so. The planet was fairly recently linked to the Federation; it was not yet known what might or might not give offence. Besides, Miss Stewart was not the Aurigaens' problem; she had only been going there as a member of the Ambassador's family. No; Kirk had to solve the problem of the Ambassador's daughter. To take her to Vulcan was indicated; *but hardly practicable*, he reminded himself. Still, it might end up as the only logical possible thing to do. He sighed. He supposed the other starship captains had their share of problems too, but it sometimes seemed that he had more than his fair share of the problem missions. Oh for one - just one! - mission where everything went according to plan, where nothing went wrong or anything unexpected turned up! He allowed himself the luxury of dreaming of such a mission for two or three seconds, then punched his intercom. "Kirk to Spock."

There was a brief silence. It was easy to imagine Spock looking up from his study of the star charts, pulling his mind back with an effort to the confines of the ship.

"Spock here."

"Found anything yet, Spock?"

"Negative, Captain. The most hopeful pattern so far has been lacking five of the major stars I saw in Miss Stewart's memory."

"Wait a minute, Spock. Any chance those 'stars' might have been planets?"

"They were quite bright in her memory, Captain. Few suns have as many as five planets appearing quite so bright, and high in the sky, from the surface of a sixth. Your own Earth has four - Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. A fifth planet - Mercury - is as bright, but is only visible very low in the sky for perhaps two days at a time at each period of possible sighting."

"But it isn't... impossible?"

"It is not impossible. Merely unlikely."

"Where is this system?" Kirk asked. "Is it reasonably near?"

"I would estimate that we could reach a point where we would see the promising constellation within ten days of leaving Delta Aurigae, Captain."

"So near?"

"Delta Aurigae is fairly near the limits of Federation space." Spock hesitated, then added, "Ten days could be a very long time with someone like Miss Stewart on board, Captain. Remember, if we are wrong, it is ten days' journey back as well, and then nearly a month to Vulcan. In that twenty days, we could be two-thirds of the way to Vulcan."

"I thought we'd already decided that we wouldn't be in a fit state to reach Vulcan from this distance anyway?"

"True, Captain. But with Miss Stewart sedated into unconsciousness, it is much easier. I merely point out that if we risk going to this further area and are proved wrong, it will take that much longer to reach Vulcan."

"And if it's right, we're ahead. We'll chance it," Kirk decided. "Feed the course co-ordinates to Mr. Chekov."

"Yes, sir."

They were delayed at Delta Aurigae, of course. The people had prepared a ceremonial funeral for their prospective Ambassador. Kirk had the feeling that if the Ambassador hadn't died, the ceremony would have been to welcome him. The preparations having been all but finished when they got word of his death, they had been hastily altered so as not to waste all the effort that had gone into them.

The body was taken down by shuttlecraft; Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Scott, as the senior officers, accompanying it. Because of protocol, they had to have a pilot other than Spock or Scott. One of the junior engineers fell heir to the duty and swore silently about it, since it meant being present, in full dress uniform, at the funeral. A guard of honour from security beamed down - also cursing among themselves the ill fortune that put them at the head of the duty roster in time for a 'spit and polish' assignment. Only the more observant among them realised that their officers were as disgruntled as they were.

The leader of the planet's government met the shuttle as it landed, also with his escort. Several of them took charge of the Ambassador's body and rushed it away to be placed in an ornate

coffin.

"Welcome to Arvis, Captain," the leader said. "I am Bard Erwin."

"James Kirk, commanding the Enterprise. We had hoped that this occasion would be a more joyful one," Kirk acknowledged.

"Yes, indeed." Erwin glanced round at the officers and the assembled security guards. "What of the Ambassador's daughter, Captain? I understood that she was to accompany her father. Is she not to honour us with her presence?"

Kirk hesitated for a moment so brief that he was afterwards certain that the planetary leader noticed nothing. "She is prostrate with grief, sir. Mr. Stewart's death was, as you will understand, very sudden, totally unexpected. His daughter has not yet recovered from the shock - she had been her father's constant companion. We understand that her mother died when she was only two and she still cannot adjust to the fact that he is no longer with her. My Chief Medical Officer is keeping her fairly heavily sedated until she has had time to get used to the thought of her father's absence. Be assured, however, we will tell her how you have honoured him on his last journey."

Erwin nodded acceptance of Kirk's offer. "What will she do now?" he asked.

"We plan to return her to her mother's family, since she has no near relatives on her father's side."

"This is what she wishes to do?"

"She is not yet in a fit state to make any decisions regarding her own future. We think that this will be the best for her, at least for the moment. When she has had time to think, time to recover from the shock, she will be better able to decide for herself what she wants to do."

"A wise decision, Captain."

As they went with Erwin to the ornate platform that marked where the important personages were gathered, Kirk realised that Erwin's reaction was one of relief that he and his world did not have to provide a home, however temporary, for the bereaved girl. The security men lined up at both sides, alternating with Erwin's escort as a guard of honour. The coffin already lay on a catafalque before them. The people of the capital city filed past in a seemingly unending line while those on the platform and the honour guard stood to attention in respect.

At last, hours later, the procession filing past the coffin terminated. A group of guards picked up the coffin and carried it through the crowd of those who had paid their last respects to the deceased. The chief mourners followed behind, the remainder of the guards behind them.

At last they reached an ornate building. The men carrying the coffin took it in. The chief mourners followed, but this time the guards remained outside. The coffin was placed on a shelf beside several others. Then the men went outside, leaving Kirk and his officers, and Erwin and the aide who had stood behind his shoulder throughout.

Erwin removed a ring that he was wearing, and moved forward with it. He slipped the ring into a slit in the shelf under the coffin and returned to his place. The aide went next, also placing a ring in the slit. Kirk glanced at Erwin for enlightenment.

"It is customary to place a personal item of value under the coffin so that the deceased knows that he is not forgotten."

"We do not have this custom," Kirk said slowly. "We have nothing we can leave." He noticed that Erwin was looking pointedly at the ribbons stitched to his uniform. "Will our medal ribbons be sufficient?"

"Indeed yes, Captain, for they are of value to you." He glanced at the aide, who brought out a tiny knife.

One by one they unpicked their medal ribbons and slid them into the slot under the coffin. Then, custom satisfied, Erwin led them out of the mausoleum.

There was also a ceremonial feast of course, one of many courses made up of food richer than they were accustomed to. They ate sparingly, uncertain as to how much they would be expected to consume, but sure they would be expected to sample every dish offered to them. Conversation was stilted. It seemed as if there was a set script for participants in such a feast. Even the guards participated, but one or two of them were less wise than their senior officers and ate so much that they were feeling acutely ill by the time they beamed up. McCoy's first job on his return to the ship was treating them, even though he had little sympathy with their gluttony.

Miss Stewart was still sleeping, thanks to the sedative. She had been given another dose of the medication while McCoy was away, since she had begun to regain consciousness. McCoy tightened his lips grimly on hearing this; the dose she had been given before he left should have held her until his return.

Protocol wouldn't let them leave at once, either. They had to waste several hours while Erwin finished preparing an official report on the number of people who attended the funeral procession; a report which was entrusted to Kirk for delivery to the dead man's family. Kirk wasn't sure that Miss Stewart would exactly appreciate such a document; he was quite sure that if the positions had been reversed, he wouldn't. But since it was the custom of the planet, he felt he had no option but to wait for it.

He had to go down to the planet for it, of course. This time he took only Spock, and beamed down. He had a fair suspicion that this would be another ceremonial occasion, and he thought it hardly fair to inflict another of these on more people than necessary. He wouldn't even have taken Spock, only he was certain that Erwin would expect him to have an escort - even if it was only one man, and that his second in command.

He was right - it was another ceremony, and attended by almost as many people as had attended the funeral. *These people must really love ceremonies!* he thought wryly, trying to gather his thoughts in preparation for the response he realised he would have to make as he listened to Erwin's speech; a speech that dragged on and on.

Finally Erwin fell silent, and Kirk rose to reply. Somehow he managed to stumble through a speech that he felt was long-winded and boring, but which was, in comparison with Erwin's, mercifully brief. And at last they were free to go.

They swung onto their new course at a desperate warp six. Miss Stewart was throwing off the effects of the sedative faster and faster. McCoy tried another kind of medication, which worked for one dose then began to fail too. Matters were getting urgent, and if they were wrong...

As they went, Spock set the computers to checking the stars ahead of them and comparing them with the constellations on his drawing. At this speed they were not so very far from the region with the suspected constellation, but once they reached it they had to compare other star groups until at last they found or failed to find the solar system from which the child's observation had been made.

Slowly the computer began to indicate that several of the star patterns in the sky ahead of them were indeed similar to the ones Spock had drawn from Miss Stewart's memory. Even more slowly, they moved to a position from which the star patterns began to take on the exact design that Spock had drawn. And at last they found a position where the patterns were exactly the same.

On the bridge, Kirk fought off the miasma of dull emotions that threatened to overwhelm him despite the sedation that was again being issued to all crew members apart from the handful of essential personnel that Spock could protect. Grief and fear had been difficult enough to live with, but now uncertainty was added to the jumble, faint at first but rapidly getting stronger. It was getting increasingly difficult to make decisions, especially rapid ones. Kirk looked down at Sulu and Chekov, momentarily envying them Spock's protection, even though it was his own choice to do without it.

The solar system they needed could be in one of two directions and they had very little time to spend in searching.

"Mr. Spock, was there anything, anything at all that would give us any help in knowing whether we're too far from those constellations or too near?" Kirk asked.

Spock shook his head. "No, Captain. We were fortunate that the child ever saw the night sky at all. But a child so young is unlikely to notice, even unconsciously, the subtle differences that would give us any further assistance. And, in addition, would probably only have vision acute enough to observe the brighter stars. It is the fainter ones that might give us a clue.

"No, wait!" Kirk exclaimed.

He shook his head trying to clear away the cloying mist of confusing emotions. Something about bright stars... Yes, of course! "Spock, that first pattern the computer identified... there were some bright stars in Miss Stewart's memory that weren't in the pattern the computer detected..."

"Five, Captain."

"Five... yes. We decided that those must be planets. Try a long range scan for a solar system with five large planets."

"Captain, I must point out that one or more of those planets might have been small ones that were at perigee to the child's home world."

"High albedo planets, then," Kirk insisted. "Scan for both."

"Acknowledged, sir." Spock turned back to his station.

There was a long silence. Apart from Sulu and Chekov, the Humans on the bridge were fully occupied struggling with their confused minds. On the rest of the ship, work was almost at a standstill. Only in sickbay and engineering was there any constructive activity. McCoy was busily occupied trying to synthesise yet another sedative in a vain attempt to keep the semi-conscious Miss Stewart from disturbing the ship even more. Yet it seemed she had developed an immunity to sedatives and the Doctor felt that he was struggling against hopeless odds.

In engineering, Scott was single-handedly keeping the engines going. Of all the men on the ship, he was not on sedatives but solely protected by Spock - although he was on stimulants to keep himself going until they found their destination. No-one dared to think of what would happen if they failed to find the world they sought... or if, having found it, the people there refused to accept Miss Stewart as being one of them.

At last Spock lifted his head. "There are three solar systems within the range of the scanners, Captain," he reported. "Two are comparatively close together, bearing 148 mark 3. The third is in the other direction altogether, bearing 321 mark 9. All three appear equally likely."

Kirk's lips tightened grimly. "Mr. Sulu, bear 148 mark 3. That gives us two chances to the other being only one. Keep scanning, Mr. Spock. Let me know as soon as possible which of the two appears more likely."

"Of course, Captain."

There was another long silence on the bridge and on the ship.

The female crewmembers were being affected more acutely than the men. Very few of them were still capable of functioning rationally. Most had retired to their quarters to lie on their beds, screaming or sobbing Miss Stewart's fear, grief and uncertainty.

Suddenly Uhura leaped from her station on the bridge, panic in her eyes. Kirk whirled to her.

"Lieutenant!"

She shrank back towards the door and became aware of the security guards standing there. She pulled away from them.

"Uhura!" Kirk snapped, drawn from his own preoccupation by her need. She stared at him unrecognisingly. "Uhura," he said again, more gently, realising her fear.

Recognition crept into her eyes and she made an obvious effort

to relax. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Not your fault, Lieutenant. Can you continue?"

"I'll try, sir."

Kirk gave her a small smile before his attention was diverted to Spock.

"Captain, one of the solar systems shows no sign of life at this distance. The other shows signs of life on the fourth planet. Intelligent... humanoid... "

"Give Mr. Sulu the heading," Kirk ordered. It was becoming a terrible effort even to think when all he wanted to do was lie down and cry, to find someplace safe, away from all these horrible, dangerous men.

The ship swung into orbit. Kirk glanced back at Uhura. "See if you can raise anyone on the planet, Lieutenant."

"... Aye, sir." Her hands were trembling almost uncontrollably as she obeyed. It seemed eons before she turned. "No response, Captain."

Kirk looked at Spock. "Mr. Spock, can you continue to protect Mr. Sulu and Mr. Scott if you join a landing party?"

Spock looked doubtful. "I am uncertain, Captain. I have never attempted such a thing. But under the present circumstances, I would consider it unlikely."

"All right, Spock. You stay here. I'll go down alone. Come down to the transporter room with me, though. I'll need you to operate the controls - I doubt that Mr. Kyle is fit to do so."

Spock followed Kirk from the bridge. "Are you taking Dr. McCoy, Captain?"

Kirk shook his head. "I said alone, Spock. Bones is needed up here."

"He is doing little now for Miss Stewart," Spock countered.

"I know. But he *is* doing something for the crew."

They turned into the transporter room. As Kirk stepped onto the transporter pad, Spock said quietly. "Be careful, Jim."

Kirk managed a smile. "I will be, Spock. Look after my ship. If anything *does* go wrong, and I don't get back... try that other solar system if you can. If you can't - if Miss Stewart's effect on the crew gets to be too disruptive... "

Spock nodded. "I understand, Jim. I will do what is necessary."

"Thank you." He straightened. "Energise."

The transporter hummed briefly, and he was gone.

He materialised in a forest glade, a small open clearing in which the grass stood almost waist high. There were several kinds of brightly coloured flowers twining on long stems in and out among the grass in a kind of floral follow-my-leader. Other flowers climbed on intertwining tendrils up the trunks of the trees that surrounded the glade. The branches of the surrounding trees leaned over the glade, almost blocking off any sight of the sky. From them hung other flowers, bright jewels hanging in mid-air, tantalising the eye with fragile beauty.

Kirk took a step forward and stopped. His feet would crush the delicate grass and flowers. He found himself reluctant to cause such damage to the tranquillity of the forest. Taking a deep breath, he searched for indications of intelligence and found evidence of it barely half a mile away.

He had to move. His ship was in danger from a hysterical girl. On this world he might find someone who could help her. But he would never find anyone if he remained standing there, unwilling to damage vegetation that would surely grow again very quickly. Lowering his tricorder he again started to step forward and was again stopped by his unwillingness to destroy. Instead, he raised his head.

"Help me!" he called. "Please help me!"

Nothing happened. For a moment he stood there, feeling foolish. Then he saw a movement among the trees, and a young-looking humanoid, dressed in a costume as colourful as the flowers, stood at the edge of the glade, looking at him.

"Who are you?"

The question sounded naive, as if the young boy could not conceive of anything that could ever harm him.

"I'm James T. Kirk, commanding the starship Enterprise. I need your help."

The young being moved into the glade. "You are another from outside. But he promised that he would not tell anyone of us.

"Nor did he," Kirk returned. "But he died not long ago, and his daughter is destroying my ship in her grief at his loss, and her fear of the future. He told us only that her mother was of a race unknown to us, nothing more; and that only we could care for her. But she cannot control her feelings and there is nothing we can do to help her. One of my men is a telepath. He drew from her mind a memory of the night sky and so we were able to find you. But he can do no more for her. Only you, her mother's people, can - perhaps - do that. Can you help her?"

The being looked gravely at him, and Kirk felt afresh the intense innocence of this world and its denizens. Even the plants were part of the over-all sense of peaceful belonging that seemed to distinguish the place. He fully appreciated Stewart's decision to keep the secret of this planet; he had had doubts about Stewart's wisdom during the past days, but now found himself in agreement. The Federation must never find out about this world. Oh, the Federation authorities would agree that there must be no interference in so idyllic a planet, but they might offer the 'benefits' of civilisation. They might ask the natives to permit tourism, so that the weary populace of other, less fortunate

planets would destroy the very qualities that made this world what it was. And the people, subjected to all the rigors of civilisation without its checks and balances, would never recover.

It took only a moment for those thoughts to flash through Kirk's mind. He knew what he must do even before the native answered him.

"Where is she?" the youth questioned.

Kirk reached for his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise - Spock here."

"This is the right place, Mr. Spock. Can you beam Miss Stewart down, please?"

"Affirmative, sir."

Kirk glanced at the native. "She'll be here in a few minutes. I would like you to know - I agree with her father. There will be no report put in on this planet by me. I don't know yet how I'll explain Miss Stewart's... disappearance, but I'll do it somehow without mentioning this place."

Spock headed for sickbay. He suspected that McCoy would probably need help with the neurotic girl. McCoy looked up as he entered. "It is the correct planet, Doctor," Spock announced. "The Captain wants Miss Stewart beamed down right away."

"If we can," McCoy growled gloomily.

They turned and stood looking down at the girl. Thanks to Spock, both were still unaffected, but Spock was feeling the strain of maintaining the mind link as well as protecting himself for so long. He was privately certain that he would not be able to do so for much longer. This time was critical for him as well as for everyone else.

Miss Stewart stared up at them, her fear plain to see.

"Miss Stewart." Spock gently. "We want to help you. We are orbiting the world your mother came from. Wouldn't you like to go back there?" As he spoke he projected reassurance as strongly as he could. It seemed to have no effect; it was clear that she didn't believe him. He reached out to touch her and recoiled sharply from her as the contact forced her emotions into his mind. McCoy gasped too, suffering from the backlash as Spock endeavoured to throw off the effects of the emotional flood. They looked at each other.

"Can we get her down, Spock?"

"It would seem not, Doctor. I must report to the Captain." He turned to the intercom. "Miss Uhura - put me on to the Captain, please."

"Kirk here."

"We have a problem, Captain. It will not be possible to beam Miss Stewart down. She is now afraid to leave the security of the

ship."

"Security? But she's scared stiff there!"

"Yes. But she is even more afraid of leaving, of facing the unknown. I have touched her, Captain. There can be no mistake. Even although she is terrified of us, we have come to represent security to her."

On the planet, Kirk looked helplessly at the composed being who had accosted him. "You understood that?" he asked.

"I am not sure," the native said. "She is afraid to come down here, to face a new situation. I can understand that. But she is afraid to stay as well?"

"She was always with her father. He helped her, protected her. When he died, she was left with total strangers. She was afraid of us... she still is. But we do represent something familiar."

The native thought for a moment. "Perhaps it would help if I were to visit your starship? Perhaps I can persuade her..."

"I would be grateful. Mr. Spock, two to beam up."

"In a moment, Captain. I must return to the transporter room."

They materialised to a fresh wave of misery, or perhaps it was only the shock of returning to the emotional overflow from the girl. The native raised his eyebrows and turned to Kirk. "I understand your difficulty," he said.

Difficulty, Kirk thought. That was the understatement of the voyage. "Can you help us? Can you help *her*?"

"I will try."

They went down to sickbay. The native moved over to the bed and stood there, watching the girl. The Enterprise men waited by the door.

As Miss Stewart saw the stranger, there was a fresh wave of terror. It slowly subsided. Then the fear diminished gradually, fading into nothing. The grief was still there, but even it was less. The memory of loss, rather than the anguish of recent loss. Kirk felt himself relaxing.

The native did not speak to the girl... at least not with words. Spock sensed a faint distant communication on a telepathic level, then the being looked over at Kirk.

"She will come with me," he said. "We will find a home for her where nothing can harm her, and she can find comfort for her grief. And you...?"

"Will say nothing of this planet," Kirk completed. "I appreciate having seen it, and I will not willingly do anything that might alter it."

The native nodded his appreciation. He held out his hand to Miss Stewart. She looked at it, hesitated, then took it. He led her to the door. Kirk led the way back to the transporter room, Spock and McCoy at his heels.

The native led Miss Stewart onto the transporter pads and stood looking at the Enterprise officers. "I appreciate your silence, Captain."

Spock raised his hand in a Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, sir. And you, Miss Stewart." He moved to operate the controls and the shimmered out of sight. Peace and tranquillity settled over the ship.

Left alone, Kirk, Spock and McCoy looked at each other. They knew each other well enough to read each other's relief without words. In silence they moved out of the transporter room. McCoy accompanied them to the bridge.

Kirk sat in the command chair, his friends at his sides. He looked around, basking in the normality of the scene.

"Take us back into known space, Mr. Sulu," he said. "Ahead warp factor two."

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THE SADISTS

by

Sheila Clark

Kirk was laughing delightedly as Spock entered. "Come and see!" he grinned at his First Officer. "Bet you couldn't do that if you tried!"

"Indeed?" The Vulcan's expression was noncommittal, but his tone was quizzical. It was enough that the signals from this planet had been somewhat of an enigma, but the Captain seemed to be actually enjoying the situation. "Captain, I fail to understand why I should become involved - "

Kirk grinned again. He hadn't had so much fun in a long while, and sharing that joy with his friend would double the pleasure.

"Because I want you to be involved," he tried to explain. "Because it would please me."

Spock sighed. If it had been anyone but James Kirk he would have dismissed the whole thing as pointless. But for this man, his Captain - he knew he would do as he asked, no matter how illogical it seemed.

"Captain, I am not sure that Starfleet would approve of our... " He attempted one last feeble protest.

"Spock." Kirk spoke patiently. "Will you just stop worrying about who will or will not approve and at least come and see this?"

The Vulcan nodded. He knew he had lost. As he approached the Captain's side, his only thought was one of relief that at least McCoy was not here.

Kirk's attention was once more riveted to the viewscreen which was showing the television transmission that they were picking up from the Prime Directive planet below; the planet they had been ordered to survey from *extreme* distance. In order to receive this picture, they must be much closer than necessary, Spock knew. With another faint sigh, the First Officer turned his attention to the screen.

An expression of faint distaste crossed Spock's face as he regarded the image being transmitted. A sizeable crowd was seated around a central area, avidly watching a man whose body was twisted into an unbelievable knot. The last man Spock had seen writhing like that had been dying, killed by an unknown poison. Spock completely failed to understand Kirk's obvious enjoyment of the spectacle.

And yet... he trusted Kirk; even although he knew that almost every civilised race had known a period when torture, bloodshed and mass slaughter had been regarded as normal spectator sports, and it appeared that this race was at that level of development. He knew that there must be more to this than was immediately obvious to him; Kirk's nature was not sadistic and if he was enjoying it, there *must*

be some harmless point to the whole affair. Spock concentrated on discovering what it was.

The television cameras moved to the spectators, who were cheering enthusiastically. There were a lot of children among them, Spock noted - not that that was any indication of how innocuous the occasion might be. Some cultures exposed their children to the most unsuitable of spectacles, he knew.

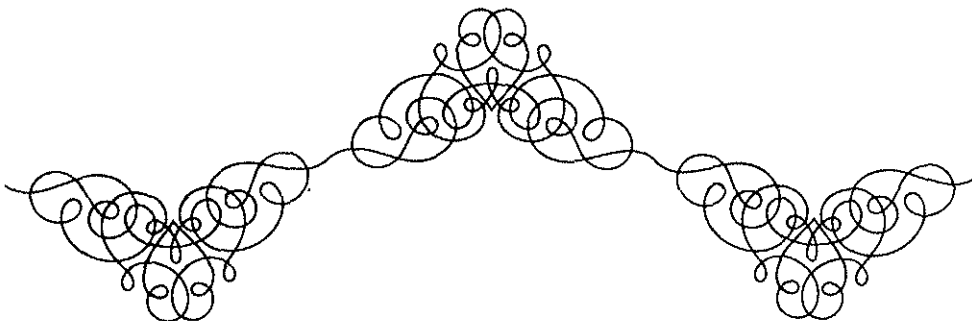
The picture returned to the central arena. The scene had changed.

Spock watched with horror the three men who were engaged in attacking a fourth man, whose only fault appeared to lie in the old, ragged clothes he was wearing. It took the Vulcan some minutes to realise that neither the petty cruelties being inflicted nor the heartless laughter of the spectators was occasioned by malicious, vindictive sadism, and a further minute to appreciate the ludicrousness of the situation. Almost unwillingly, a gleam of amusement dawned deep in his eyes.

Kirk, watching him out of the corner of his eye even while his attention appeared to be fixed on the screen relaxed slightly. He had been right; the spectacle *did* appeal to Spock's usually unadmitted sense of humour. It was just a pity he couldn't take Spock down to the planet here, to let the Vulcan experience at first hand the atmosphere of the entertainment.

However, he promised himself as Spock finally pulled a chair over to sit beside him, the next time they were within reach of a Human Federation planet, he would definitely take Spock down to visit a circus.

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ALWAYS TOMORROW

by

Valerie Piacentini

and

Sheila Clark

The sudden flood of harsh light struck painfully on eyes long accustomed only to darkness. The ominous grating as the cell door was opened brought the prisoner to his feet, his stubborn defiance still driving him to face his captors proudly - they would not find him crouching here in the dark like a beaten animal. He struggled to move forward, but could not restrain a low moan of agony as the crushed foot gave way beneath him. He was falling... falling... and braced himself to meet the impact of the stone floor.

Strong arms caught him, lowered him gently; the voice he had heard only in his dreams for so many weeks called his name with a soft, familiar urgency.

"Jim! How badly are you hurt?"

"Spock!" It was a sigh of acknowledgement, of recognition. He had known, through all those long hours of pain, that the Vulcan would come.

But he could not see - he must be certain... He raised a hand, touched soft, silken hair; his fingers lingered for a moment, then travelled down over an elegant, pointed ear, finally coming to rest on Spock's cheek.

"Don't try to talk, Jim. McCoy is coming."

"It doesn't matter."

It was always so, he thought wonderingly as a soft drowsiness that was not quite sleep crept over him. No matter how great the pain or fear that threatened him, he only had to feel Spock's touch and all was well. So different, so strange in many ways, yet all the security in the world lay in that one man...

As the strong fingers touched the vulnerable point between neck and shoulder the welcoming darkness took him, and Spock relaxed the mental block he had imposed on Kirk's pain.

Hurried footsteps echoed outside the door, and McCoy entered, to kneel at once by his patient. He worked quickly, gently, for several minutes, then raised his head to look at Spock.

Human eyes gazed deep into dark, alien eyes, each mirroring the shock and horror they felt, acknowledging their shared anguish at the sight of the crushed and bleeding body of their friend.

Time passed. There was darkness, pain. Out of the shadows

came familiar voices, gentle, caring, hands, and he relaxed, surrendering himself to the devotion that surrounded him. Despite the pain, Kirk was content.

Then frighteningly, confusingly, everything changed. The loved voices faded and were gone, replaced by those of strangers. The hands that tended him now were efficient, but impersonal. He struggled frantically to pierce the darkness, to find something familiar to hold on to. His anguished appeals to Spock and McCoy remained unanswered. More voices, half recognised, from long ago, tried vainly to calm him. Loneliness and pain enveloped him, blotting out everything else... He was lost, alone, spinning helplessly in the blackness of utter desolation...

"Jim, wake up! You've been dreaming."

Kirk opened heavy eyes to gaze up at the woman who leant over him; her face was indistinct, hazy, and for a moment he wondered at the concern in her voice. Then memory, obedient as ever, returned fully, and he sighed with weary hopelessness.

He was no longer on the Enterprise. The injuries he had sustained in the Klingon prison had been so severe that he had been transferred to the Starfleet hospital on Earth, where he had lain for many months, scarcely alive, not knowing or caring where he was. As life slowly returned his anxious family had gathered around him, and when he had sufficiently improved he had been allowed to go to his aunt's home to convalesce, and to await the final verdict of the doctors. Yesterday, they had finally told him the truth.

His sight had been permanently impaired - it would improve with time, but his vision would always be restricted. He would walk again, but the spinal damage and the crushed foot would never heal completely. He was lucky, they told him; so many other Klingon prisoners had been left as shattered wrecks. He at least could lead an almost normal life. But... he would never command a Starship again.

A wave of desolation swept over him as he gazed into a future grown suddenly bleak and cold. What was there for him now? he wondered miserably. Starfleet was all he knew, all he cared about.

His family had spoken cheerfully of a new career, new interests, but he had turned his head aside without speaking, unable to conjure up an atom of enthusiasm for the suggestions they made.

Better by far if Spock had left him to die in that Klingon prison, he thought wretchedly. What good was he to anyone now?

Some remote corner of his mind knew how infantile he was being, but he seemed incapable of pulling himself together. It was too sudden a transition from the active, interesting life he had been leading to that of a semi-invalid. He should make some effort, though, he thought dully; it was selfish to burden others with his misery. He looked up and forced a smile

"Good morning. Yes, I was dreaming... It's all right now, though."

"That's better, Jim. It's a lovely morning. Nurse Barrett and I will help you out onto the terrace - the sun will do you good."

Kirk submitted without protest to their arrangements, though every movement seemed to jar his bruised spine. When he was alone again he lay back on his couch, trying vainly to look out over the garden that appeared to him only as a confusing blur of colour. It should have been pleasant lying there in the warm sunshine, but his loneliness threatened to overwhelm him again, destroying any pleasure he might have taken in his surroundings.

Strange... he was among people, his own family, who cared for him, who were concerned about his future... Yet he was conscious only of an almost unbearable homesickness for a fragile speck of metal that flew among the stars; of straining his dim sight for a pair of dark, alien eyes that saw deeper than Human eyes ever could; of listening with an almost painful intensity for a soft, sarcastic voice commenting on his self-pity with that unmistakable Georgia drawl.

Of course they would come! he told himself firmly. The Enterprise must take priority, but when time permitted they would come to him, healing his fear and loneliness with their deep though unspoken compassion. And he needed them now as never before, he thought with a shudder; the nights were... insupportable.

With an effort he forced himself to consider the future, wearily trying yet again to come to terms with himself. It was no use; the grey despair surrounded him again, and he felt the all-too-ready tears sting his eyes once more. Despising himself for his weakness, yet unable to control it, he buried his face in his hands, striving desperately not to break down completely.

They had been very good to him, this family he scarcely knew. They deserved a better return for all their care than this childish weeping for a broken toy. The toy was broken; he must learn to accept that, and somehow build his life anew. But... that toy was everything he had ever loved, ever wanted...

His brooding was interrupted by his aunt's soft voice. "Jim, are you awake? You have a visitor."

Kirk looked up, narrowing his eyes in a painful effort to focus on the indistinct figure crossing the terrace. The blue shirt, the erect carriage of the head, the aura of calm and serenity that seemed to flow out towards him; it could only be...

"Spock!" he exclaimed joyfully, holding out eager hands.

The welcome and relief in the hazel eyes struck the Vulcan with almost physical force. Spock could not bring himself to deny that unspoken appeal. He took the outstretched hands in his, and leaning closer so that Kirk could see him clearly, he smiled - that shy, delightful smile only Kirk had ever seen, and only on rare occasions.

"How are you, Jim?" On Spock's lips the banal question took on a new meaning, a new sincerity.

"Better - a little. My sight is improving, I think, but my back is still... very painful. Spock, you... you know, don't you?"

"Yes, Jim. I am... sorry."

"Spock, what do I do now? Where can I go?"

It was a cry of anguish, wrung from the depths of his despair. He knew, as he had always known, that if there was any answer, any hope, it would come from this man. Across the limitless void between the stars, across the almost impassable gulf between their two cultures, they had come together in friendship. Countless times they had risked life, career, honour for each other. Now Kirk waited, knowing that Spock would not fail him, would never fail him. There was an answer - there must be - and Spock would help him find it.

"Jim, I..." Spock hesitated, eyeing Kirk consideringly.

The loss of his command had come as a shock to the Captain, of course, and his injuries were still causing him pain, but the haunted eyes spoke eloquently of a still deeper trouble, something that the Human hesitated to reveal. Sitting down, Spock touched Kirk's arm lightly.

"There is more, is there not?" he asked quietly. "Will you not tell me?"

Kirk looked away in confusion. "Yes, but... it's so ridiculous, Spock, I feel ashamed."

"If it causes you distress, it cannot be ridiculous. Tell me."

Kirk glanced up; his eyes begged for understanding. "It's just... I'm afraid to sleep. I fear the darkness... being alone..."

"You fear the dark? I do not understand."

"That's... how they came to me... there in prison. I was kept - always - in the darkness. I never knew when they would come; they would reach for me from the shadows, and the pain would begin. I wake up sometimes... the nightmares are horrible... and I'm not sure where I am. I think that perhaps I'm... back there... and I lie waiting... waiting for it to start all over again. I know it's stupid and childish. I have tried... so hard... but I cannot master the fear. Asleep or awake, the night is a horror to me. Can you understand that, Spock?"

"Yes, Jim." The quiet voice was very gentle. "I know how much you have suffered. The doctors here mean well, but they do not know the Klingons as we do. They have healed your body, but the mental scars remain. Will you permit me to help you?"

"Please."

Kirk lay back, closing his eyes as he felt the familiar touch on his face. The cool sanity of Spock's mind flowed into his, seeking out the tormenting memories and softening their impact. Spock would not erase them completely, knowing that Kirk must learn to accept what had happened to him, but the terror would not haunt him so relentlessly.

When the Vulcan withdrew at last, Kirk's eyes had lost some of their shadows. He smiled gratefully at his friend.

"Thank you, Spock. It's going to make quite a difference, losing that fear."

"I am pleased to have helped. Now, Jim, there are matters we must discuss. Have you given any thought to the future?"

"Not really," Kirk said shamefacedly. "I've tried to, but nothing seems to matter any more. I'm only trained for command - what else can I do?"

"I have considered that aspect carefully, and have discussed it with Sarek. He is deeply concerned for you. I hope you will forgive me for not obtaining your permission first, but the opportunity arose when we met unexpectedly, and there was no time to contact you."

"Of course I don't mind. I'd trust you - and Sarek - with my life. What did your father say?"

"Obviously you need something which will make full use of your many talents. Sarek suggests - "

"Hi, Jimmy! We've come to cheer you up!"

Spock broke off abruptly as a cheerful voice called across the terrace, moving away to stand stiffly erect by Kirk's side. He would not permit his concern to show before strangers.

Understanding this, Kirk nevertheless knew a sense of disappointment. At this distance Spock was only an indistinct, hazy figure, and the comfort of his presence was somehow lessened.

Masking his feelings, Kirk turned to greet the intruders, his cousin Judith and some of her friends. He performed the necessary introductions, unable to repress a small inward smile at Spock's unbending formality. His tender compassion had vanished as though it had never been.

Spock lingered for the minimum period courtesy demanded, then stepped forward. "Captain, I will return to the ship now."

"Do you have to, Spock?" Kirk could not conceal the pain in his voice.

"I regret I must." The tall figure stooped lower, so that only Kirk could see his face; for an instant the dark eyes smiled, lightening his sombre expression. "With your permission, I will come again."

"Please, Spock," Kirk whispered.

The Vulcan straightened, his hand raised in salute. For the briefest instant his fingers touched Kirk's, transmitting his warmth and concern to his friend. Then he was gone.

Kirk watched until the tall figure passed from sight, then lay back on the cushions, allowing the voices of his visitors to wash over him, unheeding. They meant well, he supposed wearily. It was... kind... of Judith and her friends to sacrifice their time in an attempt to amuse him. It was scarcely their fault if he found himself unable to respond to the cheerful chatter. He suddenly became aware that Judith had asked a question, and started guiltily.

"I'm sorry - what did you say?"

"Karla was asking who was that gorgeous man?"

"You mean Commander Spock? He's my First Officer."

"Tell us about him. He's the most beautiful man I've seen in ages! What's he like?"

"He's a Vulcan, and... well, he's just... Spock," Kirk said lamely, aware of the utter impossibility of adequately describing his First Officer to these kindly, good-natured people. They could never begin to understand the complexities of that gentle and lonely man.

Judith laughed, and gradually the conversation turned to the general interests of the group. Thankfully Kirk allowed his attention to wander, knowing that no response would be expected of him. He was so tired. Because of the dreams his sleep last night had not refreshed him. His head was beginning to throb again, and sickening waves of pain seemed to shoot along his back.

Nurse Barrett, coming to check on him soon after, found him only half conscious, his lips white, perspiration streaking his face. With no-nonsense efficiency she dismissed the visitors. An injection brought swift relief, and the easing of his pain allowed him to fall at last into a deep, relaxing sleep. Spock's intervention had driven the nightmares away. Satisfied that he was comfortable again, the nurse shaded him from the direct rays of the sun, and left him to sleep.

Kirk slept on, the first real rest he had known since before his capture. The afternoon passed, and the sun was just beginning to set when he opened his eyes. It was still pleasantly warm, and he lay relaxed, enjoying the peace of the garden. He could have called out to Nurse Barrett, but was content to remain quietly here a little longer, thinking over his conversation of that morning.

He sighed happily. There was no longer any need to worry, there were no decisions to be made. Tomorrow, Spock would come again - he would know what to do. Kirk did not even feel curious as to what Spock's plan might be. It was so pleasant not to have to think any more. He felt as though a crushing burden had been lifted from his shoulders to be carried now in Spock's capable hands.

As he lay in the warm evening air, his thoughts drifting idly, he suddenly became aware of the sound of voices coming from the open window of the room behind him. It was Judith and her mother - they must have forgotten he was there. He should call out to them, he supposed vaguely, but he felt too lazy to make the effort. At first their voices flowed by unheeded, then he looked up sharply as he heard a familiar name. Judith was speaking.

"Did you see Commander Spock this morning? My friends are all crazy about him."

"Yes, I saw him; in fact, I spoke to him for a few moments as he was leaving. I must say, he seemed a very strange friend for Jim - he was so cold, so withdrawn. When I told him how worried we were about Jim's lack of interest in the future, he seemed totally unconcerned."

"Jim says he's a Vulcan," Judith offered. "I don't think they're supposed to show any feelings."

"Perhaps," her mother said doubtfully, then she continued, "but I think he might have shown a little more interest. Jim seemed so pleased to see him, too."

"Did he say anything else? The Commander, I mean."

"Well, there was one thing... I was telling him about the suggestions we'd made to Jim, and I said, 'It's hard for him, of course, to lose everything he's worked for. He seems so lonely now.' The Commander looked straight at me, but I had the strangest feeling that he didn't really see me. He said, 'You are mistaken, he is not alone. I intend to ensure that he is never alone again.' I felt almost... afraid... He spoke so seriously, like a man taking a vow. Then he left. I wonder if I did right to let him in? Nurse Barrett said Jim seemed quite upset after he'd gone."

"I don't think that had anything to do with it. Jim was probably tired of our chatter, and too polite to say so. Remember, he's still not fully recovered. As far as I'm concerned, the Commander can come as often as he likes. I hope he stays a bit longer next time, though."

"Judith, you're impossible!"

Their laughter faded; they must have left the room.

Kirk lay staring into the gathering twilight, his eyes wide with horrified understanding. Had it not been for those chance words he would not have realised until too late. He would have allowed Spock to...

Shame and guilt swept over him, and he buried his head in his hands. He had been blind indeed, thoughtless and selfish; wrapped up in himself, he had not really considered what Spock's intentions might be. His only concern had been for his own comfort, his own security, heedless of the means the Vulcan might employ to secure them. Now, as though a switch had been thrown in his mind, he saw the truth - Spock would not abandon him, and as he himself could never return to Starfleet, the Vulcan intended to sacrifice his own career for his sake.

How stupid he had been, not to have seen it before! Kirk groaned in humiliation, knowing that if it had not been for that chance discovery he would have accepted Spock's sacrifice without even questioning it. Those few words had brought home to him how utterly beneath contempt he was. At least it was not too late; he could act now to stop it, to prevent Spock from throwing his life away... Or could he?

For the first time he looked at himself honestly, acknowledging the weakness he had allowed to creep over his mind. He had grown to depend on Spock much more than he had realised. The instinct to continue doing so would be strong.

Then there was Spock himself. Kirk remembered how the Vulcan oath of loyalty had driven Spock to mutiny to give Captain Pike a worthwhile future. With deep humility Kirk acknowledged that Spock's friendship for him went much deeper - how much more, then, would he be prepared to do? Once the Vulcan had made up his mind to a course of action, there was no dissuading him; it would be useless even to try. Kirk knew he was in no condition to seriously oppose his First Officer, and in addition he knew how strong the temptation would be to yield, to let Spock do as he wished. His own curious lack of resolve would defeat him. Spock would resign his commission, somehow arrange a new life for them both - as long as he lived that warm friendship would surround him.

He wanted - so much - to accept that comfort, to allow Spock to do as he intended, but forced himself to face the situation realistically. Spock's lifespan was much longer than his. Even if Kirk accepted his sacrifice, there would be many long empty years for the Vulcan after his death, without even the distraction of a career to fill them. Starfleet would lose one of its most valued officers, Spock would throw his life away - and would do so without one backward glance, without one moment of regret.

It must not be, yet Kirk could think of no way to prevent it, to overcome Spock's powerful will - and his own hunger for the comfort he wanted to desperately.

Wait - perhaps, after all, there was an answer. 'As long as he lived'. Yes, but if he did *not* live?

If he had died of his injuries he knew with certainty that Spock would have mourned him, but he would have gone on with his life, unburdened by responsibility for his crippled friend. He would never complain, never regret his decision, but Kirk could not bear the thought that the time *must* come when he would only be a burden to the Vulcan.

The injuries had not killed him - but he could die now.

Yes, that was it. That was the answer he had been seeking. Death would free him from pain, would free Spock, too, from having to sacrifice his life for a useless cripple.

Somewhere, deep-buried, shocked almost into non-existence by physical and mental suffering, the remnants of Kirk's integrity stirred, appalled by such a decision. He, Kirk, to give up, to submit tamely to death, to take by his own hand the life he had clung to so tenaciously? Never!

But the exhausted spirit was too weak, drugged into indifference. Surely, in mercy, he was entitled to *some* relief? It was not a decision he would have made had he been fully in control, but just then, to his drug-clouded mind, it seemed the ideal, indeed the only solution - an end to the pain, the fear, the worry, for himself. And freedom for Spock.

It would have to be tonight, he thought suddenly. Tomorrow Spock would return, and if he experienced again that tender compassion he was afraid that his resolve would fail. There was also the danger that Spock would somehow sense his intention, and prevent it.

Kirk sat bolt upright, ignoring the pain that lanced along his spine, planning, considering carefully the best method. There were drugs in his room - an easy death - but Nurse Barrett held the key, and he could think of no way to persuade her to part with it. Once he returned to his room he would be helpless, for she would hear every move he made. Even if he thought of some other method, the nurse checked his condition frequently through the night, and he might be found too soon.

He looked around anxiously, hoping for inspiration, and the blurred outline of the garden provided his answer. At the end of the lawn was a small lake, not large in extent but very deep. It would... serve his purpose, if he could only reach it.

But would his half-healed foot bear his weight? There was only

one way to find out. Kirk rose carefully, clutching at the railing for support. The pain was almost unbearable, but it would soon be over. Determinedly he inched his way to the top of the steps that led down to the lawn. Every movement sent waves of sickening pain flooding through him. At the top of the steps he paused for a moment, brushing sweat from his eyes, then began the laborious descent.

On the second step his foot twisted awkwardly, and he went crashing down the remainder of the flight, to lie stunned on the gravel path. When his head cleared a little he tried to stand, and found he could not. He had either broken or strained the injured foot again.

He must get out of sight - someone would come looking for him soon. He began to crawl towards the grass, his useless leg dragging behind him. Sharp gravel tore at his hands, until the grey stones were ominously stained where he passed.

After an eternity he felt the softness of the lawn beneath his hands, and paused for a moment in exhaustion, burying his sweating face in the blessed coolness. Then, raising his head, he peered into the distance, trying to remember the layout of the garden.

At the far end of the lawn was a clump of shrubbery before the ground sloped away to the edge of the lake. Once among the bushes he would be safe, he thought; he could not be seen from the terrace, and when he was found to be missing any search would start close to the house.

Kirk began to crawl again, moving faster over the smooth surface, but his pain increased, blotting out all thought except stubborn determination to reach his destination. How much further was it? The deepening twilight confused his blurred vision, and he was among the bushes before he realised.

Resting for a moment, he glanced back towards the house. His absence had been discovered; vague shapes moved across the terrace, anxious voices called his name. With a stab of regret he thought that perhaps he should have left a note explaining his intentions, but there had not been time, and the one person who mattered would understand his reasons.

Not far now...but he was weaker than he had thought. As he began to move again a sudden intense pain shot through him and he fainted, to lie still in the gathering dusk.

When his eyes opened again it was dark, but the moon had risen, shining across the water, marking out his path. The pain, still intense, seemed now to be no longer a part of him. He floated free, gazing down in pity at the man who crawled slowly, so very slowly, towards the silver path of moonlight.

The dark water was cool, inviting; in its mirrored surface the stars twinkled. Yes, that was where he belonged, among the stars... He was going home. It would be so very easy, like falling asleep. He need only travel a little further, then the dark water would carry him away, healing his pain forever... and Spock would be free.

Obsessed with that thought, and intent on his goal, he did not hear the footsteps that sped swiftly across the lawn. The water was already touching his fingers when strong hands caught at his

shoulders. Kirk frowned in annoyance; someone was holding him back, cheating him of the peace he craved. He was being drawn away from the refuge he had struggled for, being forced back into an agonised body. Obviously, the man did not understand. Kirk wanted to explain, reasonably and rationally, that this was the best way, but his voice would not obey. As he returned to full awareness he listened with some surprise to the harsh sobbing breathing pain-wrung from his straining lungs.

Those hands, strong but gentle; that quiet voice calling his name, deepened to a tone familiar, but seldom heard.

"Spock," he sighed at last, in recognition.

"What do you think you are doing?" came the response in a voice sharpened by anxiety.

Kirk tried to explain, but the words that had seemed so simple, so right, would not come now. Spock had broken the tension of his will, and he could only weep helplessly, in utter confusion.

At once the strong arms held him, easing him into a more comfortable position. The warmth of Spock's mind touched his, holding a block against the agony that consumed him. He huddled closer, until the tearing, shuddering sobs faded into silence and he could think clearly again.

His suicidal mood had passed, Kirk found. In the first shock of drugged comprehension it had seemed the only solution, but now he saw that it was no solution at all. Too many people would be hurt if he threw his life away - this man most of all.

"It's all right, Spock," he said at last, his voice growing stronger as he continued. "I'm thinking straight again."

"But why, Jim?" Spock seemed completely at a loss. "You knew I would come back, that everything would be all right."

"That is why." In response to Spock's enquiring glance Kirk continued, "I finally came to my senses and realised what you were doing. You intend to resign your commission to stay with me."

"Of course." The simple conviction of the reply touched Kirk deeply.

"I can't let you do it, Spock. Your career is only beginning; you will reach the height of your abilities when I'm an old man. I couldn't bear to know you'd wasted so many years on me. Face it, Spock - you've always been a realist; I'm the dreamer. If you give up everything now, what will you have when I'm gone? I'm... useless now, to Starfleet. You have so much still to give. Don't waste the years - at least let me know I haven't ruined your life, too."

The dark, unfathomable eyes held his. "You call me a realist, but I too have... dreams. You have often spoken to me of what you call 'the loneliness of command'; I tell you now, Jim, you do not know what it is to be truly alone.

"All your life you have been deeply loved - your parents, your brother, the family who care for you now. Women, too, have loved you - need I remind you of them? You have always had a home, affection, a sense of belonging, as I have not. My mother cares for me, I know, but in deference to my father's wishes she has never

been free to express that love. Sarek - I honour him, but... he has never been a father as you have experienced the relationship. There is much that he values in me, but also much that he merely... tolerates. He has never fully accepted me as I am. All my life I have had to fight to reconcile my Human and my Vulcan blood, and for many years I failed, until I accepted that I would never find a home on Vulcan, and joined Starfleet. So at last I came to the Enterprise."

"And Captain Pike."

"Captain Pike. You have often wondered, I know, *why* I acted as I did in taking him to Talos IV."

"I assumed... because he was... a friend."

"He... was not. He was a skilled, efficient commander, whom I could respect and obey. But to him I was only the Science Officer, reliable, trustworthy... Vulcan... with no need of friendship or understanding."

"Yet you risked much for him."

"The oath of loyalty still held me. It was one last service I could do him, but once I had taken him to the Talosians my duty was done."

"Then it is not... duty... that moves you now?"

For a moment the dark eyes held pain. "Did you really think that it was? No, Jim. In you I found the first friend I had ever known. You even had to teach me what friendship was. You looked at me and somehow saw beneath the mask I wore so carefully, saw and understood my loneliness and longing. No-one had ever done that before. Because of you I learned at last to accept my Human heritage, and to rejoice in it, since it enabled me to accept the friendship you offered. You gave me back half my life... and you talk of sacrifice! Between us such a word can have no meaning."

The alien eyes were suddenly all too Human, filled with a sorrow and an apprehension that tore at Kirk's heart. "Without you, what will I become? I am afraid, Jim. I do not want to return to what I was when you found me, a cold, unresponsive machine untouched by feeling. The emotions you taught me to accept have become... very precious. I would not lose them. You talk of long, empty years with nothing to work for. Do not make them even emptier by stifling my heart; it is Human, as yours is. Once, you had the wisdom to look beyond my face and see me as I am; do so again, and understand the isolation to which you would condemn me."

Kirk gazed searchingly into the pleading eyes, reading there the haunting fear Spock's words had so vividly evoked. Even in the meld the Vulcan had never revealed so much of himself before. He had greatly misunderstood Spock. The Vulcan proposed, not a sacrifice, but a mutual interdependence. If he must rely on Spock in his physical weakness Spock, in turn, desperately needed the emotional reassurance Kirk could offer - and he would accept it from no other.

Kirk bowed his head in defeat, a defeat that was in a strange but very real sense a victory, for both had lost and won something here. Now that Spock had openly admitted to pride in his emotions that Vulcan shell would never enclose him so rigidly again. Kirk's

acceptance of his physical limitations had enabled him to reject false pride and continue with the companionship he so badly wanted, and both needed.

When he raised his head at last Spock, sensing his mood, was smiling, a shy, hesitant smile that lit his whole face; and Kirk knew, with a delighted lift of the heart, that he would see that expression much more frequently in future.

Yet one thing remained. He had tried twice now to run away from the reality he hated; first to the comfort of total dependence on Spock, then to the deceptive peace of death. Now he knew, as his customary clear-mindedness returned, that he had come to the end of his running. He must learn to accept, without bitterness, his physical limitations before he could offer Spock the companionship the Vulcan had a right to expect. But... could he make Spock understand? Those dark eyes were surveying him questioningly, troubled.

"Don't worry, Spock," he said softly, concerned that the Vulcan might misunderstand the cause of his hesitation. "There's just one thing I have to straighten out."

"Is it our future career that concerns you? Sarek's plan is..."

"No, don't tell me - not yet. I've got to think this through first." Kirk reached out, gripping the Vulcan's thin shoulders, willing him to understand. "Spock... what happened... it almost broke me. Now I've got to fit the pieces together again - and I must do it on my own. When you told me that you had arranged everything, I was content to let you do so. What I *didn't* understand, until now, was that I was relying on your strength, not my own. You took away my fear; you even took my pain, as you're taking it now, and I allowed myself to depend on you totally. I was wrong. No friend, however close," his fingers tightened, emphasising the words, "can live for another. I must carry my own burdens, or I will no longer deserve your friendship. Our mind links have comforted me so often... but this time I allowed it to become a crutch. What I can't bear is the thought that if I continue so, one day you'll grow to despise me. No," as the Vulcan made an involuntary movement of protest, "you know I speak the truth. Your friendship is too precious for me to permit you to waste it on one who is... unworthy."

"Then what do you propose?"

"Return to the Enterprise. In - what? - eight months - your tour of duty will be over. Come for me then. I'll use the time of waiting to find myself again, to recover my self-confidence. I'm useless to myself and to you like this - I need time to adjust."

Spock held his eyes gravely for a moment, then nodded in assent. "You are right, I see that now. Very well, Jim, I will do as you ask; but when I return you will be here - promise me."

"I promise." Kirk smiled and relaxed his grip on Spock's shoulders, content now to surrender to the drowsiness that crept over him. Half asleep, he felt himself being lifted into Spock's arms. As the Vulcan began to carry him back to the house he roused himself for one final question.

"You won't change your mind? You will come?"

"I will come."

Content, Kirk relaxed again. He could depend on that promise - Spock had never lied to him. *And after all, he thought sleepily, eight months will soon pass.*

The departure lounge was crowded, and many curious glances were cast at the young man who paced with restless urgency in front of the doors. His simple, expensive clothes and the concealing dark glasses would have marked him as one of the wealthy tourists bound for Vulcan on the first stage of a galactic tour, but his tense concentration and the impatience in his limping stride indicated a more meaningful purpose.

The flight was called at last, and he ceased his pacing. As the room emptied he stood unaware of the bodies brushing past him, staring at the closed doors with a hungry intensity that could be read in every line of his body.

A deferential steward urged him to follow the departing passengers, and he started suddenly.

"I think... I will not be travelling after all," he said; his voice was slightly husky. "My... my companion seems to have been... delayed."

The steward shrugged; it was no concern of his. Moments later Kirk was alone. There was a chair in the corner and he sank into it gratefully, shielding his face with his hands. Spock had not come. The one impossible thing had happened after all.

Unbidden, his mind ranged back over the struggles of the last few months - months of pain, anguish and loneliness, during which he had learned to compel his injured body to obey his stubborn will. Pain had been the easiest enemy to conquer; it was so much a part of him now that he was scarcely aware of it, and its intensity was lessening day by day. His memories had lost their bitter, wounding sharpness, and he had come to accept his limitations, even the loss of his beloved Enterprise. The nightmares no longer troubled him, and he had lost all fear of the darkness since that meld with Spock.

No, loneliness had been the worst of all, the aching longing for Spock and McCoy, the dark hours when it seemed that he had been forgotten after all, that no-one really cared. But, recognising these fantasies for what they were, the depression of a troubled mind, he learned to overcome them, trusting in the Vulcan's promise to come for him.

When he had grown stronger there had been the unexpected visit from Sarek, whose compassionate understanding, so like his son's, had eased the long waiting. Recognising Kirk's hunger for news, Sarek had spoken of Spock, and had outlined the plans that had been made for his new career.

For some time past breaches of security on certain Federation planets had been increasing, both in frequency and in gravity. It seemed certain that the Romulans were engaged in setting up an Intelligence network to infiltrate the Federation, perhaps even Starfleet itself. As a counter measure, undercover agents had been planted in vulnerable organisations, with orders to watch for any sign of the Romulans' presence. These agents were forbidden to

break cover for any reason. Their reports were to be given to their controllers who, hiding behind well-established identities, would correlate their information and decide upon necessary action.

It was Sarek's suggestion that Kirk and Spock, working as a team, should supervise operations on the wealthy planets that were included in the tourist circuit. Their cover as former Starfleet officers enjoying a well-earned retirement would, it was hoped, be made even more plausible by Kirk's obvious disabilities which, although they rendered him unfit for Starship duty, did not in any way interfere with his mental faculties.

Kirk had been stimulated and excited. He had feared that Sarek, prompted by Spock, might invent some safe, useless desk job for him, but this proposal offered excitement and challenge, a worthwhile task that still held a spice of danger. He had accepted eagerly, and anticipation had increased his motives to get well.

Then at last the long-awaited message had come, asking him to be at the spaceport, where Spock would meet him. From there they would proceed to Vulcan, where they would undergo training before they assumed their new duties. Sarek had explained that the first year would be spent mainly in establishing their credentials, laying the groundwork which would enable them to pass in their cover identities. Kirk had taken leave of his family, and had set out eagerly to join his friend.

But this had been the only ship bound for Vulcan that day, and Spock had not come. For a moment all his old despair threatened to overwhelm him as he saw his plans crumble; then he took himself savagely to task. Was he still so dependent on Spock that this disappointment could crush him? There would be, of course, some reasonable explanation - the Vulcan must have been delayed. There would be a message soon, he was sure. Leaning back in the chair he closed his eyes and waited, confident that he had not been forgotten. Only... he had so longed for this day.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and he reached up to cover the familiar fingers with his own.

"Spock," he murmured contentedly, before he opened his eyes to meet the anxious gaze that surveyed him concernedly.

"Did my late arrival worry you, Jim?" the Vulcan asked.

"No, it was just... I was sure this was the day, and when the Vulcan liner left, and you weren't here... But I knew you'd come."

"I thought you would prefer private transport. Sarek arranged it, but there was a slight delay."

Kirk grinned. "Well, you're here now, that's all that matters. Come on, tell me - how are you? How's the Enterprise? And McCoy...?"

As they walked towards the landing pads, Spock tried to answer Kirk's flood of questions. There was so much to ask, so much to tell, that the Vulcan, had he considered the matter, would have accused himself of chattering.

Kirk's flow of questions and comments ran on without pause as they boarded the fast spacecraft Sarek had arranged for them.

"What do we do first, Spock?"

"You're goin' to Vulcan for training, and to let me see what sort of job those doctors have done in patchin' you up," growled a familiar voice from behind him as he passed through the door.

"Bones!" Kirk whirled, happiness flaring in his eyes. "What are you doing here? I didn't expect..." Joy rendered him speechless. He grabbed the surgeon by the shoulders and hugged him ecstatically.

"And where else would I be?" McCoy demanded, returning the hug. "If you think I'm going to let you two racket around the galaxy on your own, getting into god knows what sort of trouble, you can think again. I'm going along to keep an eye on you - and to pick up the pieces as usual." He grinned and continued, "And anyway, the first year, while you're establishing your cover, will make a nice relaxing change for an overworked doctor. I'm getting too old for racing around in Starships - and it'll be a pleasant change to arrive on a planet in a decent, civilised fashion, instead of by that damned transporter."

"Oh Bones, don't ever change!" Kirk laughed to hide the threatening tears. "To have you with me again... it's more than I ever hoped."

"If you will take your seats, gentlemen," Spock interrupted from the pilot's chair, "I can prepare for take-off. We appear to be holding up traffic."

With a grin of pure delight Kirk slid into the chair beside Spock. He could feel McCoy's presence behind him, and relaxed, secure in the friendship of these two extraordinary men.

"So you haven't told him, Spock."

It was late evening on the day of their arrival at Spock's home on Vulcan. Kirk had retired early, exhausted from the journey and the emotional stress of the reunion with his friends. McCoy had settled him for the night, and for once he had submitted without protest, only too happy that it was, once more, Bones' gentle hands that tended him. Apart from the tiredness there had been no ill effects from the journey, and he had quickly fallen asleep.

McCoy, going in search of Spock, had found him on the high terrace that looked out over the silent desert. He was leaning on the railing, deep in thought. At the doctor's words he looked up, the dark eyes for once open and unshielded, for now he could hide nothing from the doctor. Everything depended on perfect understanding between them.

"No, McCoy, I have not; nor will I." He paused for a moment, then went on, "How can I tell him? How do I go to him and say, 'Jim, we've all been lying to you - there is no future for you.'?"

McCoy opened his mouth to argue, but a savage gesture from Spock silenced him.

"Stripped of the gentle words you would use, that is the essence, is it not?" the Vulcan demanded harshly. "You know the truth even better than I. The pressure on the brain that damaged

his sight is already returning. It cannot be relieved again, and it will kill him. If he lives as a complete invalid, avoiding all stress and exertion, he will have five, perhaps six years. If he attempts to live a normal life there will be no obvious symptoms, but he will be dead within a year. Is that what you want me to tell him, McCoy? To ask him to choose?"

"He has the right to know," the doctor answered softly.

"Right? The right to make yet another decision, to tear himself apart again, wondering? I would spare him that, McCoy. You did not see him eight months ago... You must know that I would give anything to save him, to keep him alive; but can you really see Jim consenting to live as a helpless invalid? We both know which he would choose - and we would have to watch him counting the days. Help me; he will be happy, useful, until the end - and that end will come swiftly. I will tell him only when I must, and I... I am prepared to accept it if he blames me then for not telling him. But I will not allow you, or anyone else, to put him through another year of apprehension."

"And they say that Vulcans don't understand mercy," McCoy murmured quietly. "You'd do that - you'd take that burden on yourself, living with the knowledge that Jim is dying? Can you do it? It's going to hurt you - badly."

"I can do anything that is necessary to spare Jim pain," the Vulcan answered softly.

"I believe you. But Spock - I can't. I want to be with you, to help if I can, but I don't have your control. I'd give myself away."

Spock turned away, looking out once more over the vast, empty desert. When he spoke again his voice was remote, but held an undertone of compassion. "I know, and I have considered. With your permission I will place a memory block on your knowledge of Jim's condition. You will believe, as he does, that he is well. When the time comes I will remove the block and you will remember in full."

"I'd be grateful - but it will leave you so alone."

"That is of no consequence. I was alone before Jim came to the Enterprise." Spock paused for a moment, then added very quietly, "I will be even more so when he is gone."

"Spock, I..."

McCoy reached out, took the Vulcan's shoulders, and turned him around. The velvet-dark eyes met his, and the doctor knew a sudden terrible wave of grief and pity. How often had he teased Spock about his emotional control, urging him to let his feelings show! They were showing now, with full and complete honesty for the first time, and those tragic eyes chilled McCoy's heart. Impulsively he pulled the other man closer and hugged him fiercely for a moment, trying to express his compassion and regret.

"God help you, Spock," he murmured, his voice rough with unshed tears. "Come on, impose that block and let me go before we both make complete fools of ourselves."

He met the Vulcan's eyes calmly as the long fingers reached for his face, knowing that when the block was lifted and he remembered

this night he would wonder at the selflessness of this man, who was prepared to shoulder alone an almost intolerable burden in order to spare his friends the pain of knowledge.

It mattered little, he thought, whether Spock was right or wrong. Jim did have the right to know the truth, but as a doctor McCoy had seen only too often how the difficulty of such a choice could strain already tortured nerves. In mercy and compassion Spock had chosen for him. McCoy could not find it in his heart to blame the Vulcan for that. He was giving Jim the last precious gift that lay in his power, a final year of busy, useful life untroubled by any doubt or fear.

As the dark curtain of forgetfulness fell softly over his mind McCoy's last thought was a fierce determination that when the time for remembering came, the Vulcan would not be alone.

Then the memory block slid firmly into place, and Leonard McCoy, late of the USS Enterprise, stood looking out over the night-shadowed desert, talking with animation of Jim's recovery and their plans for the future.

At last he turned to Spock. "Think I'll turn in now, Spock - it's been a long day. Great to have Jim back, isn't it?"

"It is...most satisfactory. Goodnight, Doctor."

"'Night, Spock. Sleep well."

As the silence and solitude closed around him Spock allowed himself the luxury of a moment's relaxation of his rigid control. With a sigh he lowered his head to rest on his folded arms, staring unseeingly across the starlit dunes. He knew only too well what the next year would cost him in anguish and bitter, hidden sorrow. The thread of hope he had been given was very slender. Research was being conducted continuously, but the probability that the doctors would learn enough to save Jim's life in the short time he had left was very remote; he dared not allow himself to hope.

He also realised that this moment of total isolation would only be the first of many. Protected by the memory block, McCoy's bubbling enthusiasm would lead him to make many plans for the future, plans that only the Vulcan knew would never be fulfilled.

Yet balancing the pain, and almost compensating for it, was the quiet certainty that for whatever time was left to him his Human friend's days would be serene, untouched by foreboding. Spock straightened then, accepting the burden as the last gift he could give.

Several floors above, in his room in the guest quarters, Jim Kirk stirred in his sleep and woke. He lay quietly for several minutes, then rose and padded across to the window where he sat gazing out into the night.

The brilliant stars of Vulcan shone overhead, fascinating him as they had always done, and he studied their blazing glory for some time. At last a movement in the darkness below caught his eye, and he leaned out for a better look. He chuckled softly as instinct, more certain than sight, identified the figure.

Spock, stargazing? Even as he opened his mouth to call out the tall figure straightened decisively and left the terrace. Kirk sighed with disappointment - he would have enjoyed a quiet conversation with Spock. He smiled tenderly as he thought of the Vulcan. There was so much he still wanted to say, but McCoy's presence, welcome though it was, had made him careful of Spock's privacy.

Still, it didn't matter. Spock's eyes had looked into his, and there was no need for words between them. And, thought Kirk as he stretched, yawned sleepily, and headed back to bed, *there's always tomorrow.*

TOMORROW COMES

They spent nearly a month on Vulcan. After the first few days, which the Humans spent in becoming acclimatised, and Spock in readapting to the thinner atmosphere and heavier gravity, they began to prepare for the espionage missions which only Sarek and Spock knew would never be fully implemented. The training had to be thorough. It was necessary to maintain the facade for Kirk's benefit, lest he suspect that they were deceiving him. But it would not be wasted. Spock knew that he could not bear to return to the Enterprise - or even to Starfleet - without Kirk; and McCoy, before Spock had imposed the memory block, still knowing what was involved, had chosen to continue the mission with him after Kirk's death.

The only thing in which Sarek had been less than honest was in the length of the training. For men with Starfleet experience six months was usually considered necessary, but they did not want to strain Kirk's precarious health by putting him through the usual rigorous course. Sarek had had the difficult task of compiling a training programme which was arduous enough to be convincing, yet which Kirk could endure without overtaking himself. The Human suspected nothing; he would believe, right up until the end, that his training was to be used... and that was all that mattered.

Even Amanda had not been told the truth. They could not take the risk that her affection for Kirk might lead her to betray her knowledge. She also was allowed to believe that Kirk would have a full and useful life - slightly handicapped by his lameness and imperfect sight, to be sure, but living a normal Human lifespan.

The training was interesting; it covered a wide range of subjects - a surprisingly wide range of subjects. Spock already had a reasonable knowledge of some of what was covered, but their course dealt with these in much greater detail.

They had to learn codes - ingenious codes. They had to learn how to write seemingly-innocent letters without referring to any code master, and to decode them as readily. They had to learn to converse in code, carrying on an apparently casual conversation that, in fact, had an underlying meaning. For practice they spoke to each other in code at all times, and it soon became second nature to them.

Kirk and Spock already had a considerable knowledge of computers. The Human was familiar with programming in some detail, while the Vulcan was, of course, an expert. However, McCoy knew extremely little. His friends helped him to understand the basic

lessons that gave him a great deal of trouble. After all, he was not machine-minded, as he loudly proclaimed, but it was necessary that he learn. They never knew when the ability to alter a computer's programming without detection might help them, and each had to be self-sufficient in that field. At last their patience and Spock's unexpected ability to explain things simply won through, and he attained the minimum standard required.

In addition, all three of them had to become acquainted with handling communications systems. It might be necessary to tap into restricted communications lines, and they had to be sure that they could safeguard their own.

McCoy got an opportunity to demonstrate his acquired skills when they were detailed to study psychology, to enable them to judge the truthfulness and reliability of their contacts. They had to be aware of the subtle signs that bespoke nervousness, watchfulness, or suspicion. McCoy was an expert in this field; Kirk, as an ex-Captain, had a fair rule-of-thumb knowledge of the subject; but Spock was almost completely ignorant. McCoy expanded the lectures they were given, spending many hours with Spock, until he was sure that the Vulcan was confident with the subject. He found that the close contact, when all pretence and sniping were set aside, deepened his understanding and appreciation of the man he had always secretly considered a friend.

Fortunately they did not need to undergo the rigorous physical training usually given to field agents. Their work would be under cover, and their previous Starfleet training should enable them to deal with most eventualities. For that, Spock was grateful; he knew Kirk could not have survived the normal intense training.

The month passed all too quickly. So much had to be crammed into the time that only Vulcan expertise with sleep-learning methods enabled them to cover the course fully. Then, sooner than any of them had anticipated, it was time to begin. Bidding farewell to Sarek and Amanda they took passage to the pleasure resort planet of Marnon to begin establishing their cover identities.

Marnon was an ideal centre for their operations. It was the hub of the tourist circuit, and as such catered to the varied tastes of its visitors with uninhibited enthusiasm. Eccentric behaviour was the norm there, rather than the exception. All three men had spent shore leaves there in the past, and knew their way round the planet's amenities already.

Kirk was too well known to attempt to conceal his former status in Starfleet. Instead they disarmed suspicion by laying stress on it, his injuries serving to explain his early retirement. He was, he announced to anyone who expressed an interest, taking a long holiday with his friends before looking around for some future occupation. It was a plausible story, and McCoy's age and Spock's half-Human background made their roles equally believable. Within a very short time all three were welcome members of Marnon society.

Money was no object, so they established their base in the penthouse suite of the planet's most exclusive hotel. The proprietors of that establishment would have been astonished, however, had they been privileged to see the security devices that were installed by their guests. As Kirk remarked with satisfaction when the job was completed, not even an insect could enter the rooms without the fact being recorded.

At last, with a secure base from which to operate, and with their cover identities firmly established, they were ready to begin their assigned task, the gathering and collation of reports from Starfleet's agents in the field.

The identities of some of those agents came as a surprise, for the only thing they had in common were their differences. The wife of the Tellarite ambassador; a barman in their hotel; the leading dancer in a galactically-famed troupe; a prostitute who accosted Kirk one night as he returned to the hotel; all these and more contacted one of the three, identified themselves, and passed on the information they had gained. From each came only a fragment of news, but as time passed it became clear that they were building up a complete dossier on Romulan activity.

As the picture slowly became clearer, counter measures were taken. A problem would be identified, findings discussed, and orders given, travelling down the chain of command until... A businessman arriving from Earth had his pocket picked before he even left the spaceport; an indignant tourist was found to be carrying prohibited drugs; a drunken brawl in a disreputable nightclub ended with an Andorian pilot stabbed by a quarrelsome pimp; a small business in a respectable quarter quietly changed hands. So tight was their security, so complete their cover, that none of these seemingly random incidents were ever connected to the three men who relaxed so comfortably in the penthouse suite of the Jupiter Palace.

Although he knew how much was at stake, how much depended on the success of their operation, Kirk found himself enjoying the side benefits of their masquerade, the opportunity to indulge himself as he had seldom had the chance to do before. Perhaps there was an element of compulsion in that enjoyment, a stubborn determination not to hanker after the life that had gone; but if so he successfully concealed it from all but one pair of very bright, dark eyes, and concentrated on mastering this new challenge.

McCoy, for his part, was quietly content. Protected by the memory block, he only knew that his two closest friends were safe under his eye for once, removed from the direct line of danger. He could safely relax and enjoy their company without the constant threat that some new peril would reach out to snatch one - or both - away. He was a valuable member of the team. His thorough, painstaking mind, trained to diagnosis, had made him ideally suited to the task of sifting through the reports that reached them, seizing on the central fact that allowed the entire picture to fall into place. But he did not feel personally concerned with the results they obtained. Where Kirk and Spock led, he would follow - he had admitted that long ago - and Starship duty or intelligence work made little difference to him as long as they were together.

And Spock? No-one knew, then or ever, just what those long months cost the Vulcan. His duty was not neglected - it never would be - but he also had the terrible burden of isolation, of waiting, watching, for the first signs of Kirk's failing health.

He understood how hard it was for Kirk to let go, to accept this new life he had not asked for, and watched with admiration the Human's resolute, uncomplaining adjustment. Unexpectedly, he encouraged Kirk's involvement in the social side of their duties. He knew that the Human would not allow himself to be distracted, but it would be a diversion for him. Kirk's extrovert nature charmed even the most suspicious, and he formed many useful contacts. If he occasionally strayed from the strict path of virtue in following

some charming informer... well, it was poor compensation for the pain he still suffered.

There was only so much McCoy could do to help, and Kirk was unwilling to distress him by making a fuss. When pain and weariness threatened to overwhelm him, there was one unfailing refuge he could turn to.

McCoy never guessed how often, when they returned from an evening of mingled business and pleasure, Kirk would bid him a cheerful 'Goodnight', and retire to his room, only to emerge shortly afterwards, white with pain, to tap lightly on Spock's door. The Vulcan would admit him, knowing why he had come. The two would sit quietly talking together, while Kirk felt the tension and depression gradually drain out of him. Then, without help being asked for or offered in words, the gentle hands would reach for his face and he would drift into a refreshing, dreamless sleep.

Those hours of companionship were bitterly sweet for Spock, for he was aware of how swiftly they would end. He was certain that he had done the right thing in sparing Kirk so many months of apprehension, but he was afraid that when the Human learned the truth he might resent the usurpation of his right to make his own decisions. He knew Kirk's stubbornness so well by now. So, aware that each night might be his last opportunity to enjoy his friend's companionship with no resentment between them, he indulged his own hidden longing to express his emotions, and comforted the Human with a tenderness Kirk had long suspected, but only now experienced in full.

As time passed this new form of counter espionage proved to be spectacularly successful, and Starfleet sanctioned the expansion of the network, creating new teams. Without false modesty Kirk knew how much he had contributed to that success, and the last lingering fears that this job might have been created for him out of pity vanished forever. As his confidence returned he took the lead as before, directing the network with all his old authority, and Spock gratefully resumed the position he had always preferred - at Kirk's shoulder, supportive but unobtrusive.

Two years had now passed since Kirk's discharge from hospital, and for Spock the tension had become almost unbearable. The Human's tenacity, his love of life, had enabled him to survive longer than anyone had dared to predict, but there could be little time left to him now. Each morning Spock found himself studying the Human closely, watching with sick apprehension for the shadows that would tell him that Kirk's last agony was beginning. But each morning saw Kirk's eyes still clear, unclouded, laughing. Unwilling to lose one precious moment of the time that was left, Spock seldom left Kirk's side now; and unconsciously the Human grew so accustomed to his presence that it startled him whenever he turned around and found Spock missing.

So the Vulcan was in despair when an emergency arose which demanded that one of the team visit Andor. One of their agents had been on the verge of a vital discovery, but her report was long overdue. Her position was so delicate that she could not break cover by leaving, so it was necessary for one of the coordinators to contact her in person to receive her report.

Spock could not go himself because he was involved in vital

discussions with a distinguished Vulcan scientist. When Kirk offered to go, Spock could think of no logical reason to veto the suggestion. He did, however, persuade McCoy to accompany him, so that should anything happen, at least Kirk would not be alone.

Their parting at Marnon's spaceport gave the impression of two friends leaving on a brief pleasure trip, but Spock's heart was heavy as he watched the liner depart. Some deep vein of superstition he had never been able to eradicate completely filled him with a gloomy presentiment that this separation, at such a time, was an ill-omen. He wondered... would he ever see Kirk again?

It had been an interesting trip, and the two Humans had enjoyed it. Although its prime purpose had been the collecting of information it had proved to be a purely routine exercise, occasioned only the failure of their agent's transmitting equipment. In fact, the journey had been in the nature of a holiday. Their fellow passengers on the small liner were friendly, and the crew somewhat in awe of an ex-Starfleet Captain. Kirk had contrived to spend a fair amount of time on the bridge; there had been only one thing lacking to make the trip completely enjoyable.

But now they were only a few days travel from home, and Kirk found himself thinking more and more frequently of the coming reunion with Spock. Much as he liked Bones and enjoyed his friendship, Spock was... something special; undemanding, peaceful company. No matter how tense Kirk was, he could always relax with Spock. Even the constant niggling, tiring pain in his weak foot and ankle seemed to ease when he was with the Vulcan. How much of that was due to Spock's telepathic ability, Kirk had never been sure. The touch of Spock's mind was as familiar to him now as the touch of his hand, and he knew that the Vulcan frequently reached out to him with his mind, helping and supporting him.

Now, as they sat over a leisurely meal McCoy watched his erstwhile Captain contentedly. Jim's condition had improved dramatically during the past two years, he thought, since he had learned that he could lead a useful, reasonably active life. It was a pity that nothing more could be done about his ankle, but the hospital's report had been clear enough on that point. The doctors had done everything possible. It didn't prevent him from getting about perfectly well, although McCoy was sure it pained him more than he revealed. His sight, too, had improved tremendously. The damage to the optic nerve would never wholly mend, of course, but Jim's sight was easily equal to that of most Humans now, and certainly good enough to pass Starfleet's vision requirements.

McCoy smiled to himself as he recognised Kirk's controlled restlessness, understanding its cause. He had long overcome the slight jealousy with which he had once regarded Kirk's affection for Spock, realising that the rapport between the two men was something unique. He had not lost anything because of it. Indeed, he had gained, for without Kirk as a catalyst he would never have thought to consider Spock as a friend. Kirk had acted as that catalyst because he had wanted his two closest friends to be friends also. The years had shown that their loyalty to him was unquestionable, equalled only by their loyalty to each other.

Their mood was shattered by the sudden unmistakable sound of the alarm, followed by the Captain's voice.

"Emergency! Make your way to your lifeboat station immediately. This is a precaution only. Make your way to your lifeboat station immediately."

Kirk was on his feet already. "I wonder if we can help," he said.

McCoy shook his head. "If so, they'll send for us. The most useful thing we can do is get to our lifeboat. That way they'll know where to look."

They made their way swiftly to their appointed station, and got into the small craft. A third man was already there, Zinkin, one of the junior officers.

"What's happened?" Kirk asked tensely. Now, more than at any other time, he felt the uselessness of his position. He secured the door as he spoke.

"Meteor strike in the engine room," Zinkin replied. Orders were not to let any of the passengers know what had happened, to plead ignorance, but he knew that these retired Starfleet officers would not panic. "The engineers are trying to seal the leak. It should be all right."

"How could a meteor get through the shields?" McCoy asked blankly as they sat.

Zinkin shrugged. "I don't know, sir. All I know is, it happened."

"It must have been a pretty big one," Kirk mused. "Probably bigger than the screens were set to deflect. You don't often get one that size on established routes."

Any reply Zinkin might have made was lost as the liner exploded. The lifeboat was sent flying, tumbling over and over as it went. Only the statutory seat belts saved the three men from being thrown about violently.

After a minute the tiny craft steadied.

"Have we a viewscreen?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, sir." Zinkin flicked it on.

There was nothing to see, save a slowly dimming patch of luminosity that they knew had to be the remains of the liner. Without a source of light to reflect off them, there was no trace of the other lifeboats. There was no way of knowing, by sight, if any of the others had been thrown clear as they had.

"Communications?" Kirk asked.

Zinkin shook his head. "Only a distress signal," he said. "We can send an automatic distress call, but we can't receive anything."

"Brilliant!" McCoy muttered.

Zinkin grinned wryly. "Financial, sir. The Owners must

include a radio among the lifeboat equipment by Federation law, but there's no regulation to say how effective it must be. A simple automatic distress beacon is the cheapest thing available, so that's what they provide. After all, a lifeboat radio is very seldom needed, so what's the point of spending money on something that isn't going to be used?"

"And all lifeboats must have a ship's officer assigned to them, so it doesn't matter if they all get separated?" Kirk guessed.

"Yes, sir." Even as he spoke Zinkin had been checking his control board; now he punched several buttons, and then sat back. "There's a solar system quite near, sir. I've set course for it. We should get there within two days."

"Good... I don't suppose you'd know if your communications officer got a signal off at all?" Kirk asked.

"He had the time," Zinkin said, a little doubtfully.

"But you think maybe he didn't bother?"

"No-one thought it was serious," Zinkin admitted. "The bridge crew were staying put, I know, though strictly speaking they should have gone to their lifeboats too. But the Captain wanted to be on hand to get the engineer's reports, so... Well, they all stayed. In fact, the captain didn't originally want to disturb the passengers, but Marty - the First Officer, sir - insisted that they should be sent to the lifeboats. We could regard it as an extra drill, he said."

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other. "Was the Captain reflecting the Owners' views on emergencies?" Kirk asked.

"Well... I think so, sir. The Owners tend to regard emergencies as a bad reflection on their service. They don't exactly like Captains who over-react to anything." Zinkin looked a little anxious. "Don't tell anyone I said that, please - it could cost me my job."

"At the same time, I'd like to see that your First Officer gets the credit for acting sensibly and saving the lives of... well, all of us who are saved," Kirk commented.

Zinkin made no answer, and Kirk let the subject drop, wondering just how many of the other lifeboats had got safely away, and if any of them were making their way to the solar system that was their own target. He let his mind wander onto the subject of just what had gone wrong, concluding that probably the meteor's passage had weakened a fuel line somewhere, causing it to snap and exploding the fuel. From there he wondered how long it would be before a search was mounted.

Spock, he thought. Spock will be worried. I wish there was some way I could let him know that we're all right.

Time passed slowly. The three men spoke little, each immersed in his own thoughts. The distress signal was not strong enough to be picked up on Marnon. If the communications officer had indeed failed to send out a mayday, no-one would know until the liner failed to arrive on schedule that something had gone wrong. Then a search would have to be mounted, and not until the search vessels were relatively near them would their distress call be picked up.

It was not an encouraging thought.

As they neared the solar system Zinkin operated the long-distance scanner. It was far from accurate, being also the cheapest model available, Kirk guessed, giving poor definition and only a broad outline of conditions. Its half-efficient readings reported the third planet of the system as being the most suitable. Life form readings were vague, but seemed to indicate a lack of any intelligent life. That was both a blessing and a disadvantage, Kirk reflected. Starfleet's Prime Directive didn't enter into it, but intelligent inhabitants might have helped them. As it was, they would have to manage as best they could with a minimum of survival equipment.

Zinkin took the ship down in a gradually decreasing orbit. As the gravitational pull increased the little craft descended faster.

"You're going down too fast," Kirk said uneasily.

"She isn't answering the controls properly," Zinkin replied tensely. "She must have been damaged in the explosion."

"Can I help?" Even as he asked, Kirk knew that he couldn't.

"Thanks, sir, but no."

The lifeboat dropped lower, its speed increasing as it went. Zinkin wrestled with the controls. There was water ahead - an ocean - and they were headed straight for it. Zinkin pushed the starboard turn control. The ship began to respond, but momentum still carried it inexorably towards the sea. He pushed the control again, holding it down. The warring forces struggled for supremacy, then, with a horrible sound of tearing metal, the ship was thrown to the ground a bare quarter of a mile from the sea, rolling over and over. Friction finally overcame momentum, and the wreck slid to an ungainly halt as birds scattered from their feeding ground in a flutter of wings, startled by the sudden movement and noise.

When the echoes died away the birds spiralled down again. One, more daring than the rest, landed on the new boulder that had been flung unceremoniously into their territory, and rose again instantly as the friction-heated hull burned its feet. Its cry of alarm set the others off again, and they circled suspiciously for some time. After they were reassured by the lack of movement they glided down to resume their interrupted meal. From somewhere far off a raucous voice screeched an answering challenge, and then fell silent.

Spock was in a state of suppressed excitement. The days of Kirk's absence had been torment for him. Although it had been, in some ways, a relief not to have to act, to pretend that all was well, he was heartbreakingly aware that these were days lost from the short time that he would still have Kirk's company. That it was borrowed time made the short separation even more poignant. Kirk should have been dead a year now, yet he was still showing all the signs of a miraculous near-complete recovery.

But Spock did not believe in miracles. The prognosis had been brutally honest. The apparent recovery would fail abruptly, and Spock would be alone again. Not as alone as he had once been, for McCoy would be there, but the doctor was getting old, and would, in a comparatively short space of years, be physically unable to

continue with their work. That Kirk, too, would have died anyway while Spock was still relatively young was something the Vulcan tried not to think about.

But for the moment Kirk - and McCoy - would soon be home again. Privately Spock determined that in the future - for what future there was - he was not going to be separated from Kirk again. The torment of having to hide his knowledge of his friend's imminent death was pleasure beside the torture of being away from him, always wondering, waiting for a message to tell him that Kirk was dead, had died when the Vulcan was not there...

The communications signal buzzed for attention; automatically, he went to answer it.

"Spock."

The face on the viewscreen was that of a stranger. His features were composed into an artificial expression that Spock could recognise, after all his years of close association with Humans, as the assumed sympathy of a man who was not immediately touched by whatever tragedy he had come to impart.

For a moment Spock's heart seemed to stop beating. It had happened, after all... He drew a deep breath, preparing himself to receive the expected news impassively. No stranger should know how deeply he felt this...

"I represent the spaceline, Mr. Spock. I have the unpleasant duty of informing you that there has been an accident involving the liner on which your friends Mr. Kirk and Dr. McCoy were travelling. We picked up a distress call from the ship, but it was cut off and we have been unable to raise her since. We will, of course, let you know as soon as we have any further word."

For a moment Spock was unable to speak, confused by the swirling, chaotic maelstrom of emotions that surged through his mind. It was not the immediate news that he had feared; yet it was not necessarily a reprieve, for the doctors had been positive that a sudden shock would kill Kirk as effectively as the abrupt deterioration of his condition would. Although, if anyone could save Kirk under those circumstances, McCoy could. The loss of contact was not necessarily serious... The liner *might* be limping home even now...

"Has a search been launched?" Spock asked. He noted approvingly, though with some surprise, that his voice was satisfactorily controlled, calm and impersonal.

"Yes, Mr. Spock" The tone said, 'Of course.'

"Very well. Thank you for your courtesy."

Spock switched off. For a moment he buried his face in his hands, allowing himself the luxury of relaxing his control, but *only* for a moment. Decisively he straightened again and reached to punch a number on the communications set.

"Sarchym here." The face of the man from whom they occasionally hired a small spacecraft shimmered into view. "Oh, hello, Mr. Spock."

"I wish to hire a ship immediately, Mr. Sarchym, for an

indefinite period. A three-seater, as usual."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Spock." He flicked through the pages in a small book that lay on the desk in front of him. Spock considered this unnecessary; Kirk had always called it pretentious, he remembered with a pang. "Yes, the ship you usually have is available. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Perfectly satisfactory."

It had taken them three trips before Sarchym had learned that they really did know what they were talking about with regard to spaceships. He had initially tried to palm them off with ships which, while adequately serviced - it would have been more than his business was worth for the ships not to be spaceworthy - had certainly not filled Spock's requirements. Finally, realising that they knew exactly what they wanted, Sarchym had given them the use of his newest vessel, which he normally reserved for very special occasions. It really was a good one, too. Now Spock was grateful for the obstinate stand they had taken with Sarchym. At the time, however, he had intensely disliked the unpleasantness that had been occasioned by the whole business, although the man had not held any grudge against them. As far as he was concerned, the entire affair had been a battle of wits (and stubbornness) that he had lost fairly. Thereafter, he set himself, as a good businessman, to give satisfaction.

"How soon do you want it?" Sarchym was asking.

"I said 'immediately', Mr. Sarchym. I will be coming straight to your office, and will expect the ship to be ready when I arrive."

Sarchym nodded so hard that Spock half expected his head to fall off - and then chided himself for his misplaced thought. This was no time for humour, even though Kirk had taught him not to take himself quite as seriously as he had once done. It was fairly obvious that Sarchym knew about the missing liner, and guessed why Spock wanted the hired vessel.

Despite his haste Spock, as always, checked the vessel's systems thoroughly. Sarchym hovered attentively, but Spock knew from his attitude that he had no doubts about his client's approval of the ship's readiness. It did not make him any the less thorough. Finally satisfied, he nodded to Sarchym and prepared to take off as soon as the Human left the launch pad. He checked with control, and set off.

He kept the radio open, adjusted to pick up anything on both the distress band and the normal commercial band the space liners used, but both remained silent. He was not surprised. The sensors were set on maximum, too, so that he would be able to detect immediately anything that came within scanning range.

It was three days before the sensors detected something. Ahead of him was a cloud of radiation analogous to that produced by an explosion involving anti-matter, and he was aware of an unusual tightening in his throat. Only one thing could have caused this; the explosion of a spacecraft's engines. Whether any of its personnel had escaped was still uncertain; that was what he must discover.

He scanned for debris, and at first it seemed that there was none, only the microscopic dust of near-complete annihilation. Then he realised that there were some scattered, large objects, and headed for the nearest.

It was a liner's lifeboat. He examined it and found that the door was open. Inside, he could detect bodies, and he knew that the occupants had died from explosive decompression. There was no way he could identify the bodies without personal investigation. Grimly, he set about his unpleasant task. He had to know... Even as he worked at retrieving them he wondered why the official search had not arrived yet. Then he realised that he had been told as soon as there had been word, and had undoubtedly acted far more rapidly than the authorities, who would have an unavoidable amount of unnecessary red tape to cut through. As though red tape mattered when men might be dying!

He had the bodies now. Mentally preparing himself, even though he knew the odds were against finding his friends first time, he studied them carefully. Both were clearly strangers - even though their faces were discoloured by the bursting of the tiny blood vessels veining them, and bloated by decompression, their build was definitely wrong. Stoically, he returned both to the lifeboat that had become their tomb, and set off for the next large piece of debris.

Steadily he worked round them, finding fourteen in all. One was empty; the others all held their quota of either two or three dead, caught with the lifeboat door open and killed. It seemed as if whatever had befallen them had happened quickly, so that the victims had not had time to reach safety. And yet... a liner should carry more than fourteen lifeboats. Even a small liner such as this one had been should carry at least two dozen. Ten lifeboats were unaccounted for. Was it possible that some had got away? Or had they, too, been vaporized with the ship, unlaunched?

Yet where would a lifeboat go? He had passed none headed for Marnon. Besides, the distance was far too great for a lifeboat unequipped with warp drive. The purpose of a lifeboat was to get survivors to a nearby planet, if there was one, or to keep them alive near the wreck until rescue came. There were none near; therefore, any that had escaped had headed for landfall somewhere.

He began to scan for a nearby solar system. Ah! His sensors were picking up a solar system directly ahead of him - within lifeboat range. He laid in a course, knowing he could cover the distance in a matter of hours.

As he began to make his way towards it, he remembered the official search, and reached for the radio. A simple signal would suffice. Rapidly he broadcast a message reporting what he had found, and stating that he was continuing the search for survivors. Then he returned the switches to their former mode.

He scanned the system as he approached, the sensors telling him that the third planet was the only hopeful one, even before his radio picked up a weak - a very weak - distress call. Someone *had* reached here, then. Resolutely refusing to let himself hope that it might be McCoy - he had never entertained hope of Kirk's survival - he descended towards the signal. At least he could succour survivors... no matter who they were. He dropped lower, approaching the shore of a wide sea. Ahead of him, something glinted in the sunlight; the sensors told him that the signal was coming from it.

He landed and stared, horrified, at the crumpled wreck. The signal was on automatic, and had continued to broadcast even after the crash. No-one could have survived this! To escape such an explosion, and then to die like this...

Then he saw, beside the wreck, an obvious grave. Someone had, against all the odds, survived. Spock climbed wearily out of his ship, wondering where the man - or men - who had dug this grave had gone. Not far, knowing that a rescue party would begin its search at the site of the wreckage.

He approached slowly, his eyes fixed in reluctant fascination on that hideous mound.

"Jim?" he whispered, absurdly; the dead could make no answer.

There was no name on the grave. Vulcan logic warred with Human hope, and lost. There *might* have been other survivors... He did not know it was his friends in that lifeboat...

Blurred footprints led from the grave to the sheltering cliffs, and he followed them blindly to a shallow cave. Stooping, he peered inside, to see a huddled figure curled up asleep. The face was turned from him, but the shape was unmistakable. It was McCoy.

Spock's hands flew to his face to stifle the whimper of pain he could not completely suppress. It was as he had feared, but the grief was no less bitter for the expectation.

Stumbling, he retreated back to the grave; he must have a few moments in which to indulge his grief, unseen, before - somehow - attempting to comfort McCoy.

In that moment the strain of two years finally caught up with him, and Spock fell to his knees to crouch in dumb agony by the grave of the only man who had ever reached out to him in open, unashamed affection. Yet, even now, Vulcan training held. Though his eyes were blurred and aching the tears would not fall. And yet, of what use were tears? To weep for all the years that were left to him would not heal the agony he now knew.

With a moan of despair Spock pressed his hands against the grave, fighting the insane urge to claw away the concealing sand, to gaze for the last time on the face of his friend.

"Spock?"

The Vulcan shivered. Insanity! It must be! Reluctantly, he turned to meet the so-familiar eyes, almost welcoming this creation of his overstrained mind. The illusion was perfect - Jim, as he had so often seen him, his lips curved in the smile he kept only for the Vulcan. Spock gazed hungrily, knowing that the hallucination must soon dissolve, but unwilling to lose a moment of the haunting presence.

Soft laughter echoed, and warm hands reached to touch his face. "Spock, I'm really here - I'm no ghost."

The Human had seen that still, crouching figure, and had understood what must be going through the Vulcan's mind. The desolation of that huddled form sent a wave of compassion through him and brought him to his knees facing Spock. Almost blindly Spock reached out and clutched at Kirk's shoulders, feeling the Human's

body beneath his hands, warm, solid, indisputably real and alive.

Joy compelled a response where grief could not, and demanded an expression. Spock's eyes flamed with delight, and he smiled wonderingly. "Jim! I was so afraid..."

A flicker of movement caught his attention - McCoy was awake, was coming... The doctor must not see... His face settled once more into its habitual studied calm. "I am relieved to find you unharmed, Captain," he ended formally.

For a moment longer their eyes held.

"I understand, Spock," Kirk whispered as he dropped his hands.

McCoy bustled up, calling from a distance. "I told you he'd beat the official rescue to us, Jim! Spock, I've never been so glad to see those pointed ears."

"As far as I know, I am over a day ahead of the search teams," Spock said, keeping his voice steady with an effort.

"That doesn't surprise me," McCoy said dryly.

"Who... Who was that?" Spock asked, indicating the grave.

"One of the officers from the ship," Kirk said sadly. "It wasn't his fault we crashed - the lifeboat was damaged when we were flung clear of the liner. Didn't you find anyone else?"

"Not alive," Spock replied. "None of them had been able to close their lifeboats in time."

Kirk and McCoy looked at one another. "Maybe they did have time, but just didn't bother," Kirk said. "No-one thought it was serious. The Captain didn't even think it was necessary to order us to the lifeboats, only the First Officer insisted. And being experienced spacemen, of course we made sure that the door was firmly closed behind us..."

Spock looked closely at him. He seemed unaffected by the ordeal just past, apart from his sorrow at the death of their companion. "I suggest we return to Marnon at once," he said. "We can do no further good here, and we have work to do."

They climbed into their ship and took their accustomed seats. The ship rose easily, and swung away across the ocean. Behind them, the disturbed seabirds slowly returned to their interrupted feeding beside the lonely grave.

There was nothing to distinguish the three men from any of the other wealthy patrons of Marnon's most luxurious hotel - nothing, except perhaps that the two Humans seemed unusually at ease with their Vulcan companion. Certainly there was nothing to indicate that the three formed the most efficient team of coordinators in Starfleet's formidable counter-intelligence network.

The fair-haired Human rose to his feet and grinned down at his companions. "I think I'll call it a day," he said. "Spock and I are leaving tomorrow for the mountains, and I know he wants to make an early start. If I don't get some sleep he'll have to drag me out

of bed. Coming, Bones?"

"In a minute, Jim. I think I'll just finish this drink first."

"Goodnight, then, and have a good leave. See you in the morning, Spock."

"Goodnight, Jim. Sleep well."

The two men remaining at the table watched the stocky figure disappear in the direction of the lift, then McCoy set his glass down abruptly and turned to Spock. All trace of his lazy good humour had vanished, and the keen blue eyes were intent.

"All right, Spock, let's have it. What's wrong?"

"Not here, Doctor. I suggest we go to my room."

As the two men made their way through the busy lounge McCoy was again puzzling over Spock's strange behaviour. He had never pretended to understand the Vulcan at the best of times, but this was something new even for Spock.

It had been growing more noticeable for some time, the watchfulness with which the Vulcan surrounded Kirk; the accident had only emphasised it. Certainly Spock must have been worried, but... his reaction to finding Kirk alive and well had thoroughly shaken and confused the doctor. It was as though Spock was amazed, as well as delighted, to recover Kirk safe and unharmed. His brooding vigilance had intensified since then, although Kirk himself gave no indication of being aware of it, but McCoy wanted an explanation. It was for this reason that he had lingered, seizing the chance to get Spock on his own.

Now in the Vulcan's room McCoy sat and waited patiently, knowing that Spock would not be hurried. He noted without comment the Vulcan's unusual air of tension as he prowled restlessly up and down. At last Spock halted and swung around to face the Human.

"McCoy, you ran medical checks on Jim after you were rescued - what did you find?" he asked abruptly.

"Find?" McCoy was puzzled. "Nothing of any significance. He's run down, a little underweight for once - that's why I'm recommending this leave - but otherwise he's in pretty good shape."

"It is as I thought." Spock resumed his pacing, but his tread was deliberate now, as though he was considering a course of action. He halted again, facing McCoy, his hands extended. "Two years ago I placed a block on your memory; I must now remove it," he said quietly.

"A memory block! Now why...?" McCoy bit back the question even as it formed, knowing that the Vulcan would never have touched his mind without his consent. "Go ahead."

The long fingers seemed to reach into his skull, parting the veil that had been drawn in his mind all those months ago. At last Spock straightened.

"I ask you again - what is Jim's medical condition?"

"I've told you already," McCoy said with weary patience, "he's

just fine... Uh-oh!"

"Precisely, Doctor. Jim Kirk should have died four months ago. Yet not only is he still alive, but after undergoing all the dangers of this past year, including your recent accident, he seems perfectly healthy. Why?"

"I don't know," McCoy said grimly, "but I intend to find out. I'm sure of my own readings - I checked him out pretty thoroughly. Look, take him on leave as you planned. I'll go to Earth, to the hospital where he was treated, and see if I can come up with anything. And Spock - don't tell him anything until I get back. No point in worrying him unnecessarily."

"Very well, Doctor."

Jim Kirk waved cheerfully to Spock, turned, and dived into the clear water of the mountain lake. As he swam he took advantage of his solitude to allow a frown to cross his face. He could feel Spock watching him with the same intense concentration he had displayed for some time now.

But why should he? No danger threatened them; he was well... But - was Spock? he wondered suddenly. He had only just begun to notice it, but the Vulcan looked ill. The skin was drawn tight across his cheekbones, and the once-brilliant eyes were dull, sunken in shadows like green bruises, as though he had not slept.

Kirk's instinctive fear - *pon farr* - had been quickly dismissed, for McCoy had told him that owing to Spock's half-Human blood the dreaded Time of Mating would not affect him again for quite some time. So what could it be? he asked himself worriedly, shivering with fear at the thought that Spock might be seriously ill. He had *said* there was nothing wrong, but...

The last two years had been happy ones for Kirk. He still missed his Enterprise, still longed for the life he had known, but there had been... compensations. He was doing useful work, and doing it well. More than this, he still had Spock at his side, dependable and faithful as ever. Bones too, for the doctor had quietly and stubbornly insisted on remaining with them. Yes, he had been very lucky... but now he was haunted by his concern for Spock.

If only Bones was here to settle his fears! The doctor had taken off on some jaunt of his own, but Kirk promised himself that as soon as he returned - he was due any day now - he would bully Spock into submitting to a full medical.

Assuming a cheerful expression, Kirk left the water and flung himself down beside Spock, allowing the warm rays of the sun to dry him. The two men spoke easily, comparing notes on the progress of their organisation, evaluating the information Kirk had gained on his last trip, and fitting it into the overall picture. While they talked Kirk studied Spock without appearing to do so, and was secretly shocked by the deterioration in his appearance since this leave had begun. He looked even more tired and ill than before.

He was just wondering how to raise the subject again when a shout in the distance caught his attention. Narrowing his eyes against the glare of the sun, Kirk turned to see McCoy waving from the top of the path that led down to the lake. He was about to

comment to Spock when, with a flurry of movement, the Vulcan leapt to his feet and hurried up the slope to meet McCoy.

Following at a more leisurely pace, Kirk was aware of an electric tension between the two men. He could not hear what McCoy was saying, but from the expression on both their faces it was clear that his news was both urgent and shocking.

As he reached them Spock turned white, lifted an unsteady hand to his forehead, and in complete silence pitched forward into McCoy's arms. Kirk gave an incoherent cry and ran the few remaining paces. Dropping to his knees, he almost snatched Spock from McCoy's arms and peered anxiously into the still face.

"What's wrong with him?" he demanded. "Is he all right?"

"If you'd get out of my way for a moment I might have the chance to find out," McCoy muttered. His voice was unusually strained. The scanner sounded for a moment, then the doctor raised his head.

"Only shock," he said soothingly. "Help me get him inside."

"But what *happened*?" Kirk demanded again.

"Later, Jim. I'll explain it all, but let me see to Spock first. If you knew what the poor devil's been living with these past two years..."

Kirk cast a startled glance at McCoy; the doctor's voice held a note of gentleness he seldom used when speaking of the Vulcan. Without any further delay Kirk stood, lifting Spock carefully, and carried him into the cabin to lay him on the bed. McCoy bent over him again, and a hypo hissed.

"That's better! He'll sleep now - and God knows, he needs it. Come on, Jim - I want to talk to you."

"You're *sure* he'll be all right?" Kirk asked with a hesitant glance towards the bed.

"He'll be just fine," McCoy assured him. He led the way out of the bedroom, and motioned Kirk to sit down.

"There's no way to soften this," he said abruptly. "You'd better read these. They're summaries of the personal notes of your surgeon. I obtained them directly from him."

With a puzzled frown Kirk opened the folder McCoy handed him and began to read...

SUBJECT: *Captain James T. Kirk, Commanding Officer,
USS Enterprise.*

CASE HISTORY: *Suffered head injury and severe back and leg
injuries as a result of imprisonment by the
Klingons.*

TREATMENT: Initially operated on by ship's Medical Officer. Transferred to Starbase Hospital, Earth. Rest and therapy until patient strong enough for final operation.

COMMENTS: Home care advised while strength is regained. Back injury progressing satisfactorily; right ankle will continue to give some trouble until corrective treatment is completed, and will probably remain weak. However, this should not prevent patient from returning to active service. The head injury has been successfully treated, and while vision is still impaired it will improve as the bruising of the optic nerve heals. Should attain acceptable level for a Starship Captain.

PROGNOSIS: Complete recovery bar slight weakness of right ankle after final operation.

Kirk laid the sheet down and looked at McCoy in bewilderment. "That's not what they told me," he said confusedly.

"It's not what they told us, either," McCoy answered grimly. "Read the next sheet, Jim."

SUBJECT: Commander Richard J. Caspian, USS Exeter.

CASE HISTORY: Suffered severe head injuries, minor back and leg injuries as a result of a treacherous attack by the natives of Kalinga during First Contact talks.

TREATMENT: Operated on by ship's Medical Officer before transfer to Starbase Hospital, Earth. Discharge on medical grounds pending.

COMMENTS: Back and leg injuries responded to treatment. The head injury shows only temporary improvement. Vision is permanently impaired, due to pressure on the brain, which has been temporarily relieved, but which will eventually return. Further surgery would kill patient.

PROGNOSIS: Apparent recovery will continue for approximately twenty months. There will then be rapid collapse, and death will follow shortly thereafter.

There was a long, tense silence. At last Kirk raised his head.

"McCoy, explain," he said simply.

"Too many specialists," McCoy said wearily. "The same surgeon

handled both cases, yours and Caspian's. Then you were passed on for therapy and after-care, and somehow - God knows how - the two reports were confused. Your name and case history, Caspian's comments and prognosis.

"We were told that you only had... twenty months or so to live. Spock kept that knowledge from you - he wanted you... to die... in peace. With my consent he placed a block on my memory so that I would not betray my knowledge."

The doctor's voice hardened, grew tense with an anger Kirk had never heard before from McCoy. "They're still checking, but as far as we can tell it was a careless, stupid error by the computer operator who entered the files... and they were never checked. But Spock's had two years of hell, waiting, knowing that one day..."

"Dear God!" Kirk swallowed painfully. "He did that... for me..." He could not go on.

After a moment McCoy leaned forward and touched Kirk's shoulder gently. "You realise what this means?" he said. "I triple-checked the reports, just to be certain. A simple operation to correct the ankle injury, and you can return to Starship duty."

"Does it? Yes, I suppose it does." Kirk seemed dazed. "But what made you suspect?"

"Spock couldn't understand how you survived the shipwreck. We were told that any sudden shock or strain could kill you. So he removed the block, and I went back to Earth to see what I could find out."

"So Spock's known, these last few weeks, that there was a chance?"

"We hoped so, but it seemed impossible. Now we know that there was never any danger after all. The relief was just too much for him; even Vulcans have a breaking point, and he's reached his."

"No wonder." Kirk leaned forward, his head buried in his hands. "Just give me a minute, Bones," he said shakily. "I haven't quite taken in yet."

It had grown dark by the time Kirk roused himself and looked around. He shivered: it had grown cold, for the fire had long since died down, leaving only cold ashes. McCoy had retired some hours ago, weary from the long, hurried journey he had undertaken, but wrapped in his thoughts, Kirk had scarcely noticed his departure.

Kirk stretched, yawned, and eyed the couch with dislike. Spock was still asleep, McCoy occupied the other bedroom - it seemed that this must be his bed for the night. First, though, there was something he had to do.

Spock lay asleep in a patch of moonlight, the soft light revealing an unguarded gentleness in his face. Kirk looked at him, conscious of the utter impossibility of ever repaying his debt to this man. The news McCoy had brought had smoothed the lines of worry from the Vulcan's face, and only now did Kirk, seeing the contrast, realise how deeply the past months must have hurt Spock.

He understood the Vulcan's reasons for concealing the truth as he had believed it to be, for Spock knew him as surely as he knew himself. The thought of death did not, in itself, terrify him, for he had long ago accepted it as part of the life he had chosen. But he would have dreaded the long days of waiting, the uncertainty of never knowing if each day would be his last. Spock had understood, and had shielded him from that as he had shielded him so often in the past; but he had paid the price.

Filled with a sudden overwhelming tenderness, Kirk reached out and touched the sleeping face lightly. Instantly Spock's open eyes focused and gazed into his, filled with an incredulous joy as he remembered McCoy's news.

"Don't... look like that," Kirk whispered shakily. "I'm not worth it."

"You are to me," Spock replied simply.

There was a long silence. Kirk moved to sit on the bed, unwilling to leave - for the first time in so long there were no secrets between them.

"What will you do now, Jim?" Spock asked at last. Now that the danger was over he willingly returned the initiative to Kirk.

The Human laughed softly, happily. "That's the best of all. Captain Treron has been promoted away from the Enterprise. Starfleet Command is so anxious to make amends - it was partly their fault, after all - that they agreed like a shot when McCoy told them he thought I'd want to re-assume command of my ship."

Spock's hand caught Kirk's. "I am... happy for you, Jim," he said.

There was a note of wistfulness in his voice, and Kirk laughed again.

"Not just me," he said softly. "Did you really think I'd leave you, even for the Enterprise? McCoy's coming too, of course," he added.

A faint sigh and an increased pressure on his hand expressed the Vulcan's relief more eloquently than words.

"Rest now, Spock," Kirk said gently, settling the Vulcan back on the pillows, watching until the weary, dark eyes filmed again in sleep. He thought with distaste of the couch in the next room; it would be cold, and besides, Spock's fingers were still tightly curled around his. He felt a curious reluctance to break the contact.

With some difficulty he managed to kick off his boots, swung his legs up onto the bed, being careful not to disturb the sleeping Vulcan, and lay down. He was very tired, yet totally at peace.

There was still so much he wanted to say, he thought as he studied the tranquil face beside him, but now there would be time enough. With a contented sigh Kirk turned his face into the pillow.

"This time, Spock," he murmured drowsily, "I really do have... all my tomorrows."

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